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MARTIN FFRENCH

BY

JOHN BRADSHAW,

AUTHOR OF "DEDHAM PARK," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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PART III.

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MARTIN FFRENCH.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD ROOF-TREE.

The drop-scene is again lifted, and the footlights illumine the third act of a drama in which Martin appears as the central figure. When it once more falls, as fall it must, would the bright anticipations with which it had risen be fulfilled, or would it descend none too soon—a veil to young hopes blighted, to sorrow beyond recall? Who can tell? The Parcæ refuse to speak. Clotho silently spins her thread; Lachesis points mysteriously to her globe; Atropos stands ready with her scissors.

But to-day the Muses are chanting their festive song, and Martin pours at their feet his glad libations.

The office in Fosset Lane has been left to the care of Mr. Nesbitt and Joseph Fleming. The Widow Toler can warm her feet on Martin's fender, and, in his arm-chair, dream long dreams about Viscount Murdock and her former greatness. Rain might descend upon, fog might envelop, and smoke darken dreary, soot-begrimed Camptown, day after day, and well into the new year, yet be powerless to ruffle Martin's temper. He should be miles away, under the old roof-tree, near to Agnes, and surrounded by all that made life dear.

He had settled himself comfortably in the corner-seat of a smoking compartment; a yellow-backed novel was upon his rug; and his feet rested upon a duly heated foot-warmer. Soon the train glided from

the station and sped smoothly over a long viaduct, raised high above the slums on its either side. Through a canopy of smoke, suspended in the heavy atmosphere and varying in degree of density, the young traveller looked down upon narrow streets and rows of dingy tenements; could see children playing in the gutters and squalid women gossiping at the doors; or could study the clothes hanging in back-yards and drying amidst showers of soot. But he scarcely took heed of the several details. He vaguely thought how poor and vile and wretched was the prospect; how miserable the lot of those who were doomed to spend their lives in such a place.

What a far happier fate was his than theirs! Even Fosset Lane and the Widow Toler's corner mansion seemed as Elysian Fields when compared to so great a squalor. And now — now that he was bound for

Chudlegh, that he was about to leave these sights behind, the future beamed brighter by the contrast; the chant of the Muses was sweeter to his ear, as he poured fresh libations at their feet.

Then came Norton—with scores of pretty villas clustered on its hillside and dotted about its tree-clad fields. And, as the train flew by, the sun, darting one fair ray through a rift in the murky heavens, aimed it at the church's tapered spire—creating it a fairy beacon, conspicuous against a background of purple storm-clouds. This was the first glint of sunshine that Martin had seen for days, and he hugged it to his breast as the forerunner of a happier time.

The train went swiftly on its way. Crewe, Stafford, Rugby, were reached in turn, and in turn left far behind. The yellow-backed novel lay unheeded upon the rug. The motion was all but insensible

—just sufficient to entice his thoughts towards a region of soon-to-be-enjoyed, unutterable bliss; yet too gentle to wake a suspicion that Clotho and her sisters might be smiling contemptuously at the lyrics of the Muses or at the oft-repeated meed which he rendered to their song.

Homesteads and villages, country seats and babbling streams, appeared but to disappear in one unending panorama, ministering by their reposeful look to the joy that filled his heart. The soil became drier, warmer, more gravelly; the road led through deep chalk-cuttings; the trees spread their graceful arms abroad and were no longer stunted; ploughmen were ripping up the land for a winter fallow; rooks cawed harshly as they hovered behind the plough and alighted to snatch a hasty meal from the fresh-turned earth; a wintry sun peered from above, looming large and dim through the haze which it could not scatter,

yet cheering by its presence and, like its friend the rainbow, giving promise of a brighter dawn.

Then came London; and, after London, what seemed an endless journey in the dark to Kirkford. Not that it was really endless, for the station clock was barely on the stroke of five when the train pulled up alongside the platform. The old town appeared to welcome him in the guise of an old friend. He could not recall one-half the many afternoons which, as a child, he had spent there — shopping with his mother—or the many times when he had ridden to it from Chudlegh with Arthur and Agnes. But he remembered every carrier's cart that lined the High Street on a Saturday afternoon, each carriage that came thither from the country, each butcher's cob about the place. Sleepy it might be to some; but to him it spoke of home, of his first impressions anent the

world, of the many occasions on which he had passed through it on his way from school.

He sprang from the carriage, and, in the lightness of his heart, gave sixpence to the porter whom he chartered to carry his portmanteau to the trap which was there to meet him.

"Robert! Is that you?" he cried to the groom. "How are the people at home?"

"Master and missus is quite well, sir, thank you. And so be Mr. Arthur. Mr. Arthur, sir, sent his own trap, as thinking you might prefer it to the Whitechapel."

"And he was right," exclaimed Martin, springing into the T-cart.

"Would you care to drive, sir?"

"Not I, Robert. It will be dark enough in the cuttings between this and Chudlegh, and you'll know where there is any rough metal. They are pretty sure to have been

tinkering at the roads—they always do at this time of the year."

"Yes, sir. There's a deal of new stuff put down a couple o' miles this side Chudlegh."

"Well, give the mare her head; and let us get over the ground within the hour."

The road was heavy, owing to late rains; but for the first three or four miles out of Kirkford it crossed wide-spreading, level commons. Here and there a light twinkled in the window of a well-remembered cottage, half sunk in its nest of gnarled old apple-trees. Then came a village, with a bright light burning before the door of its one inn, and with another, more dim, visible through the small panes of its only shop. Presently, they entered cutting after cutting, overhung with oak and elm, whose twined branches looked weird and ghost-like in the first reflection

of the coming moon; mounted hill after hill, and descended into valley after valley, until they topped a last ascent and overlooked the champaign where glimmered the lights of Lingfield Chase, and where, nestling under the northward hills, rose the square tower of the church which Martin knew so well. Even the face of Agnes faded for a while before a flood of happy memories. Thoughts of his mother, of the dear old governor, of his brother, left no room for other things. How pleased they would be to see him! How happy they would all be for the next few weeks!

When he alighted at the hall-door, he kissed his mother on both cheeks, and then, resting a hand upon her either shoulder, pushed her from him and gazed intently at her face. He fancied it to be a trifle more worn than formerly, to be marked by a shade of care, and that the eyes were more wistful in their love for him

than at any previous visit. It was but a fleeting thought; and a moment afterwards he turned to his father.

"Don't think of dressing to-night," said the squire. "Dinner will be on the table by the time you have washed your hands, and you must be hungry, boy, after your journey."

"Right you are, governor!" and away bounded Martin to the well-remembered bedroom, which faced the tall elms. He opened the casement and thrust full half his body through the aperture. What a fragrance of decaying leaves rose from the damp soil. How different the soft air to the murky atmosphere that he had breathed the day before. Why could he not be always there? What Nemesis could it be that tracked his steps and would compel him to return to Fosset Lane? Arthur and himself were their parents' only children; why then were their paths so

different, their futures so distinct? Never had the well-known words appealed so forcibly to his soul:—"There are just two creatures I would envy. A horse in his wild state traversing the forests of Asia, or an oyster on some of the desert shores of Europe. The one has not a wish without enjoyment, the other has neither wish nor fear."

But that was no time in which to moralize, and, performing a hasty toilet, he rushed downstairs. Seated in the old dining-room, beneath the old roof-tree, he forgot black care and yielded to the enjoyment of the hour.

"I suppose, Arthur," he said, "we shall find heaps of pheasants this year? It must have been a capital season, taking it all round."

"Plenty. And I've only shot the hedgerows and a couple of outlying spinnies. Linn would not let me go near the covers."

"Linn wouldn't let you!" cried Martin, laughing.

"He declared that they must not be touched until you came home."

"Bravo, Linn! A friend in need is a friend in deed. I suppose, governor," he continued, "that you have something in the stable that will carry me across country?"

"You can take either Kangaroo or Betty Patch," said the squire, alluding to the hunters which he kept for his own use. "Or both, for the matter of that. I've not been out much this season."

"Not been out much!" exclaimed Martin.

"I've felt a bit stale. And the rheumatics have been troublesome since harvest."

"Poor old governor," said Martin sympathetically.

"Years will tell their tale, my boy. Mathews has been confined to the house for weeks; so that what the parish would have done, meanwhile, without Arthur, I

don't know;" and he regarded his elder-born with pride.

"Is Percy at home, mother?" inquired Martin.

"Yes, dear." And again she seemed to look at him wistfully.

"He's got no end of blood in his stable, I suppose. But he was never much of a rider. A good horse is utterly wasted upon the fellow."

"He does not think so," remarked Arthur quietly.

"Perhaps not. He always had a good idea of his own merits." For Martin, mostly so generous toward others, always felt a certain irritation at the mention of Percy's name, and for which he would have found it difficult to account. Possibly it was owing to their natures being so antipathetic.

"And how are the people at the Chase, mother?"

"Quite well, I believe—at least, I think so."

"You think so! Are they from home, or have you not seen them lately?"

"They are at home; but I have not been there for more than a week." And Mrs. Ffrench appealed nervously to the squire, who frowned a negation to her appeal, and enforced his refusal by a significant shake of the head.

Martin raised his eyes in time to observe the last traces of a frown disappear from his father's brow. Then he turned to Arthur, whose face was unusually flushed. What could it mean?

"Is Agnes quite well?" he blurted out at last, feeling bold enough to put the one question which had been trembling on his lips.

"Quite," returned Arthur, recovering his composure. "I have seen her several times in the last few days."

Again Martin asked himself, what did it all mean? Surely Arthur had not supplanted him—taken advantage of his absence and, like another Jacob, received a blessing which had been won by stealth? That could not be. His brother was staunch and true, loyal as himself, and with a soul above so great a meanness.

"I suppose, my boy," remarked the squire, apparently to change the subject, "that you'll be off to the kennels first thing to-morrow. Juno III. proved herself a likely bitch the forepart of the season, every bit as good as her granddam. She's had but little breaking-in either; she showed it in the blood when a pup."

"How about young Timon?" inquired Martin.

"Not so staunch. Inclined to run in when he hears the shot whistling over his head. Linn didn't handle him enough before 'the first.' A setter requires a sight

more patience than a pointer, and patience is what Linn has not got."

From Juno and Timon the conversation gravitated to the hounds, to the last good run, to the supply of foxes, to Arthur's work in the parish, in short, to every possible topic connected with the country-side, save and except the doings at Lingfield Chase—until Martin at last declared that a little fresh country air would make him sleep the better.

He passed through a French-window, and paced the terrace where once he had buried his face upon his mother's knee whilst listening to the overthrow of his young ambition, and whence he had rushed to commune with his disappointment in the solitude of the tangled underwoods. Now, too, he felt that he must be alone. The dreams of that long day must be vested with a coherence which up to that hour had been impossible. He must regard the

position in which he stood without blinking, and prepare for the exigencies of the morrow.

He leaned over the balustrade and surveyed the prospect at his feet. The full moon lightened an almost frosty sky, deadening the stars, and illumining the wide plain with its chastening beams. It shone upon the lake at Vachary, flooding it with silvery sheen. It played upon the turrets and clock-tower of Lingfield Chase, and made Chudlegh Common loom softly visible amid the bosky shadows which girdled it on every side. On the right, the Coombe Hills stretched their long length southward, their details indistinct, their sharp outline looking in the deceptive glamour nearer than their nearer base. To the left, oak-wood treading upon the heels of oak-wood, lent the impress of a fathomless eternity.

Not that Martin realized the charm of

the scene in its every detail. He was too greatly distraught for that. But it soothed him, and caressed him, and spoke of home. It cooled a frame which had been heated by excitement, and permitted him to reflect more dispassionately upon the step which he was about to take. He felt that Agnes was dearer to his heart than ever. That no other girl could be to him what she had been, and must be. Stirred by which thought, his spirit drifted into the far moonlight, borne on the wings of a great love. For a time, things present were forgotten, lost in the immensity of things to come. It was long before his ideas became less vague, or returned to more immediate objects. When they did so, a look of satisfaction crossed his face. "And this is home," he murmured; "the true haven in which to rest after weeks of grinding toil. How familiar the place seems! Each tree stands as I remember it to have done long

years ago. Each mossy patch on the balustrade is the memento of some childish act. And yet—and yet, though these things have not changed, it is not the same old home. I feel as a stranger—a passing guest, separated from that old life by the gulf of absence. New interests have arisen, in which I have no share. Even to-night there was much that I could not understand. I have no nag in the stable that I can call my own. Poor old Negro, he could not be expected to live for ever! And he, like that old life of mine, is dead and—buried."

Martin slowly crossed the terrace and re-entered the house. The drawing-room was deserted, and the solitary candle waiting for him on the table covered both wall and ceiling with fantastic shadows. His footfall echoed in the hall and passages more loudly than he remembered it to have done before. He was glad to reach his bed-

room. In that, at all events, he could descry no change. There, his gun stood in its wonted corner; his fishing-rods hung in their accustomed places; the moon beamed through the casement just as it did before he went to Rothbury. This at least was home—the one spot in all Chudlegh that he could call his own.

Next morning, he ordered Robert to saddle Betty Patch. She was a far better roadster than Kangaroo. She would carry him more comfortably to Lingfield Chase than the other, and on her back he could swing over the ground at a round trot without any fear of her foot tripping against some projecting stone. The day was bright and the sun warm, although the rime of an early frost still whitened the hedges on their shady side. A wholesome sleep had refreshed his young limbs, and now, as he hurried through the crisp air, his doubts of the previous evening were cast aside.

He began to picture to himself how Agnes would look; to wonder whether the past few months had wrought much change in her appearance, moderated her coquetry, and made her the least bit more staid. He was almost sorry when he reached the Chase. He had intended to weave so many pretty speeches as he came along; but upon his arrival he was no more prepared with these than when he left the Hall. His heart fluttered as he inquired for Mrs. Hardyng, and did so still more when, a servant having taken charge of Betty, he was about to enter the quaint old parlour.

Mrs. Hardyng was alone. Time had dealt kindly with her good looks. Her hair was now slightly tinged with grey, and a dainty cap surmounted her shapely head. But otherwise she was little altered.

"Ah, Mr. Ffrench," she remarked, after first greetings had been exchanged, "I am

glad to see you. You are such a stranger; so much so, that I have contracted the habit of calling you, 'your brother's brother.'"

"My brother's brother!" exclaimed Martin.

"Yes. We see so much of him and so little of you. In fact, your name is hardly mentioned now. But will you not take a seat?"

Martin sank into the nearest chair, his heart the prey to a vague alarm.

"And what have you been doing all this long time, Mr. Ffrench?"

Mr. Ffrench! Had she then forgotten that not so many months ago she had been wont to call him Martin?

"I have been hard at work—in Camptown."

"At work!"

"Yes—in Camptown."

"Do you not find work very stupid? But I know nothing about business," she

added apologetically. "We have never been connected with it in any way."

Martin explained that it was rather stupid, and not the kind of life that he should have chosen.

"And is not Camptown a very dirty place? And are not the people extremely vulgar?"

"Oh, no—I assure you—quite the contrary," he hastened to say, thinking the while of Dorothy, of her father, and Miss Lander, and of the pleasant hours which they had spent together.

"Really! Then I must have been misinformed. By-the-by, you will stay for lunch, I hope. It seems such an age since we met."

"I shall be delighted," exclaimed Martin, somewhat cheered by the invitation. "And Agnes, Mrs. Hardyng? Is she quite well?"

"Thank you—yes. She is riding with Percy Todd. He dined and slept here last night."

Martin's countenance fell.

"Percy has grown into such a charming young man," she continued, "and is *so* much sought after. Mr. Hardyng has suggested to the Lord-Lieutenant that he ought to be placed upon the commission, and it is rumoured that he will stand for the county when the next vacancy occurs."

Could this be Percy?—that Percy whom he had at one time fought, and then taken under his protection; the fellow whom he had always considered such a mean hound? The idea came upon him so suddenly, that at first he failed to grasp its possibility. His mother had written to him each week, but had left him ignorant of many things that he could have wished to know. Indeed, her letters, like most letters, expatiated on subjects which he could gather from the daily press, but left untouched the very matters about which he would liked to have been informed.

"I am afraid that he will not be able to remain for lunch," Mrs. Hardyng said regretfully. "He is to bring Agnes home, and must then go on to Kirkford. There is a committee-meeting of the 'Kirkford Artizans' Field Botanical Association' at two, and he mentioned at breakfast that it was absolutely necessary for him to put in an appearance, seeing that at any moment he might be called upon to contest the county."

Martin devoutly wished that Percy had even then been busied with an electioneering campaign. But, failing that, it was grateful to find that he would be absent even for one afternoon.

Presently he heard the sound of horses' feet upon the gravel, and, unmindful of Mrs. Hardyng, flew to the window, which he reached in time to see the skirt of a habit disappear within the porch, and Percy start rapidly towards the lodge. In another moment Agnes entered the parlour.

"Oh, mamma!" and then she paused, noticing that a stranger was in the room. "Martin!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad. I heard that you were coming home, but did not expect to see you so soon." And she held out a small hand, which Martin shyly grasped in his broader palm. "You will stay to lunch, of course," she continued. "Mamma, you have asked him to remain for lunch? We shall have so many things to talk about."

Her manner was not that of a girl who for a first time has met her lover after an absence of many months. It was unembarrassed—and friendly.

"I will run upstairs and change my habit, but please don't wait, mother; I shall not be many minutes."

How graceful she appeared to Martin as she tripped lightly through the door! She had ripened marvellously since he had seen her last. She had lost all vestiges of childhood

and developed into the queenly beauty. A little sigh escaped his lips despite an effort to repress it; for, at that moment, what would he not have given had the last few months been spent at Chudlegh?

"And Blanche?" he inquired of Mrs. Hardyng, as they took their places at the luncheon-table.

"Have you not heard?" she said. "She left last Saturday on a short visit to Middleshire."

"I did not know." But he felt glad that she had gone. He should have Agnes more entirely to himself.

"I am sorry, too, Mr. Ffrench, that my husband is from home. He was compelled to go to London this morning—on somewhat important business," she added in a meaning tone.

Martin was politely expressing the regret which he experienced at the circumstance, when Agnes joined them, and, by a flood of

questions as to what he had been doing these many months, engrossed his attention until they rose from the table.

"Will you come into the garden, Agnes?" he said, as they were crossing the hall.

"You do not want me, I suppose, mother?"

"No, dear. By all means go—that is, if you are not too tired."

It formed no part of Mrs. Hardyng's policy to turn an altogether cold shoulder on Martin just then. Indeed, on second thoughts, she considered his arrival to be providential. He might not only prove useful to her schemes, but hasten their fulfilment. Perhaps she had been a trifle too cold at first, and now hastened to condone any such mistake by repeating more fervidly—

"No, dear. By all means go with Mr. Ffrench!"

Agnes put on her garden-hat, and passed with Martin through the porch.

"I shall not be able to walk very far," she said. "I am the least bit tired after my ride, although I did not tell mother so. But there is a warm seat against the south wall of the kitchen-garden, where we shall both get the sun and be sheltered from the wind."

A seat under a kitchen-garden wall did not altogether tally with Martin's idea of what a lover's trysting-place should be. He would have preferred it to be summer-time, when they could have sat under the weeping willows. But to do that was impossible. The ground was too damp, and the leaf-denuded trees could offer no shelter from the wind. After all, the spot to which Agnes led the way might have been far worse. A sweet-briar fence protected them on the right, row upon row of thickly standing nut-trees lay to their left, and between these was a rosery, planted in long, straight lines, ugly in itself, but affording at the

proper season an abundant harvest of perfect blooms.

"Agnes," he said, when at last they were seated on a bench against the wall, "I cannot tell you how glad I am to be back at Chudlegh."

"I can well understand that. No other place can be like home." And, like Martin an hour before, she could not repress a sigh.

He looked at her in some anxiety.

"Aggie," he continued nervously, "I want you to tell me one thing. There is nothing between you and Arthur, is there?"

"Between me and Arthur?"

"Yes, Aggie—between you and Arthur!"

"What nonsense, you silly boy. What could have put such a thing into your stupid head?"

"I am very glad," he returned more cheerfully. "That would indeed have been a bitter cup. And now, dear, tell me.

Don't you think it high time that we thought about getting married? It seems awfully long ago since we used to sit under the willows and talk about it. Ever since, I have so longed for the day to come, and, Aggie, I can keep a wife now."

She regarded him tenderly—nay, even affectionately—whilst her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't talk like that, Martin; for perhaps it can never be."

"Never be!"

"Perhaps not," she replied sadly. "Mamma might not like it."

"What can that matter, Aggie? I can wait any number of years. I will toil for you—slave for you!"

She trembled at a love so earnest. Had she not been withheld by some restraining influence, she would most probably, then and there, have decided in his favour.

"I would slave for you as no other fellow

would. I have loved you ever since we were boy and girl. Aggie, do not turn from me now. Do not say that you refuse such love as mine."

He seized her hand, and she allowed it to rest in his.

"Aggie! When awake, I have thought about you; when asleep, I have dreamed about you. Day by day I have pictured to myself the present hour—the time when I could stand boldly at your side and ask you to be my wife. Can you hesitate?" he exclaimed, almost fiercely. "Can you find another to love you as I have done, and do, and shall do? Oh, Aggie, speak! Tell me that all these years I have not loved in vain."

By an effort she freed the hand which he held so tightly, and rose, tottering as she did so, to her feet.

"Go—*go*—GO!" she cried with increasing emphasis. "Tempt me no more.

May God for ever bless you, dear." Then she fled from his side, as she had fled, long years ago, from beneath the willow; but, alas, with more troublous, remorseful thoughts than then.

CHAPTER II.

AN IRRECOVERABLE PAST.

When she left Martin, Agnes hastened, nay almost ran, towards the house, and, hurrying through both porch and hall, sought refuge from his insistence in the solitude of her chamber. Once there, she sank upon her knees by the bed, and buried her face in its soft quilt. To pray? Ah no. If only she could have done that, her future might even yet be crowned with joy and her self-abasement give place to an honest purpose. Instead, she threw her hat upon the floor, and seized the quilt in her trembling grasp.

"Mother—mother!" she moaned. "Why have you made me fall so low? Why have

you driven me to become the thing I am? He loves me as no one else can ever do. And I, yes, even I—degraded, tainted, unworthy—could love him now. Could love him? Do love him, shall love him, must love him! Martin, dear Martin! how could I have been so blind?" And the girl in her distress grasped the quilt more tightly.

Yet, but a few minutes ago, she had cried —"Tempt me no more." If her pain were so hard to bear, what could she have meant by that? Indeed, was it a temptation? Was it not rather a blessing—this thing which he had so strenuously urged, and from which she had so deliberately fled? The offer of a true heart can be no temptation; its refusal for the sake of pelf can be no blessing. Well indeed might she moan in her great distress,—"Mother, mother! Why have you made me fall so low?"

Agnes was pretty and fond of admiration. She had not that inherent strength of

character which made Blanche so staid, and gave to Dorothy her charm. She inherited many of her mother's foibles, and had begun to regard the world through that mother's inverted telescope. She had almost come to prefer ambition to contentment, wealth to competence, a gilded slavery to love. But she was still young, nor could she relinquish her girlish purity without a struggle. As yet, her better self revolted against the consummation of so great a sacrifice. And that afternoon the battle was at its fiercest; love contended with ambition; Martin's burning words wrestled with her wounded soul.

Agnes had never thought so remorsefully about the evil she had brought to Martin as she did when kneeling beside her bed. As a child, she had been flattered by his attentions, and enticed him to dangle at her side. In later years, she had seen his love

grow stronger, but had thrust all thought of whither it must tend behind her back. He was such an honest, noble fellow, that she knew, if ever they came to be married, he would prove a good husband. And yet she had left the future to evolve itself.

Possibly, had Martin remained at Chudlegh, matters might have turned out differently. His presence would have been an antidote to Mrs. Hardyng's views and to her daughter's facile dereliction of what was due to her moral worth. But, as it was, he had been absent for many months, and Agnes had proved too unstable to weather so great a test. Then, strangely enough, Arthur had been unwittingly one of the most important factors in the present crisis. A second time he had proved the passive agent destined to be the bane of his brother's happiness. His determination to enter the Church had opposed itself as a stumbling-block to Martin's military

career. The love which he felt for Blanche had induced Mrs. Hardyng to cast her looks afield and to hanker after an equally good settlement for Agnes.

Nor had she far to seek. Percy Todd was ready to her hand. When she sounded his father upon the subject—indefinitely, of course, and with that *dégagé*, hope-it-may-prove-to-be-so air, which women of the world can assume at pleasure—her words did not fall upon a barren soil. Christopher Todd was as eager as ever Mr. Ffrench had been to found a county family. He was stiff-necked and proud—stiff-necked by reason of his hitherto success; proud through the position which his wealth secured. He had raised himself inch by inch, and step by step. As each inch and step was gained he had separated himself just that much from the commoner crowd which he was leaving, until in process of years he had become

a landed proprietor, and sought to lord it with the best. There was but one drawback to his prosperity—he could not be reckoned even as one of Nature's gentlemen. He could not assume his new *rôle* with any degree of comfort to himself. He could not tarry until his merits had been recognized by those with whom he attempted to vie. He must take rank by storm, as he had taken all else that had come within his reach.

Christopher Todd had been placed upon the commission within six months of his appearance at Chipping Manor. Within another six he had been made a deputy-lieutenant, and, even before this latter honour was conferred, had vainly contested the county at an expense for each vote best known to himself alone. The county, irritated by the advent of such a firebrand, had dropped him as it would have done a red-hot cinder, and, in all probability,

it would require the lapse of years before his precipitancy could be buried in oblivion. And yet one consolation remained. His son had reaped where he had sowed. Percy now posed as a Conservative, and that, aided by his prospective wealth, secured to him the position which Mrs. Hardyng had indicated to Martin.

Christopher Todd, with all his ambition, would have been the last man to bow an unsolicited neck beneath Mrs. Hardyng's yoke. But that lady having been the first to make an overture, he grasped the great good which would result both to Percy and himself from an alliance with the family at Lingfield Chase. The same evening he mentioned the substance of their conversation to his son, and his son readily undertook to initiate the campaign by becoming a frequent visitor at the Chase, where he received every encouragement that Mrs. Hardyng could bestow.

But, despite her powerful aid, Percy's suit halted. He could make no headway with Agnes; Blanche was decidedly unfriendly; and her father endured rather than countenanced his presence. Both father and daughters remembered the absent Martin, and contrasted the open, honest face of the latter with the self-satisfied, almost repellent features of the new aspirant. A capture appeared so hopeless, that Percy would have retired from the chase, had it not been for two incentives. He hated Martin with a goodly hatred, and was determined to bend Agnes to his will.

Martin had befriended him at Rothbury, and had protected him from thrashings which could have done no harm, and which might possibly have licked him into a better shape. But the recollection of those old days served no other purpose than to add fuel to Percy's malice. And now an opportunity was ready to his hand whereby he might

retaliate with a stinging blow, and get the upper hand of his quondam friend.

Then, Percy was determined to bend Agnes to his will. She had thwarted him, despised him. She had both scorned his money and bruised his self-esteem. He had attempted to win her by direct assault, but had failed in the attempt. He would try what a little skilful diplomacy could effect. He would make his approaches on her weaker side, would excite her vanity, awake her pity, and dazzle her with the prospect of what his wealth could give. And who could be so fit a tool for his purpose as one of her own sex—one who could whisper in her ear both night and morning; who was no more scrupulous than himself; and whose conscience, if conscience it could be called, might be stilled with gold? And such a tool he found in Bertha.

Bertha was not a Chudlegh girl, but had been brought thither from London. Her

character, as some people are wont to regard character, was unimpeachable. She made her young ladies' dresses. She was a tire-woman of indisputable talent. Mrs. Hardyng pronounced her to be a treasure, the greatest comfort, an acquisition that it would be most difficult to replace. And yet, she was not without faults. Her moral perceptions were of the most hazy type; she deemed the most oblique manœuvres to be fair in love; and then—she could be bought for gold.

One evening, about four months before Martin's return, Agnes found Bertha in the act of placing a bouquet upon her toilet-table.

"Where did you get that, Bertha?" she inquired unsuspiciously.

Bertha did not immediately respond, and Agnes looked at her in surprise.

"If you please, miss, I'd rather not say."

"Tell me at once!" cried the girl.

"Mr. Percy sent it, miss."

"Take it away — out of the room, I mean," she continued, seeing that Bertha was about to place the bouquet on a chest of drawers, "and never dare to do such a thing again."

"Mr. Percy will be very grieved, miss, I'm sure."

Next day, Percy called and was more diffident than he had so far been. His manner was subdued, as though he were the prey to some hidden sorrow. He barely raised his eyes, even when Agnes spoke; either then or on the many such occasions which followed. Agnes began to regret that she was even the unwilling cause of so great a depression. Martin was absent, and no doubt happy. Percy was present, and manifestly unhappy. At times a sigh would escape her lips; and one evening it did so whilst Bertha was arranging her hair.

"Ah, miss!" said that adroit young

person, sighing back her sympathy; "you do remind me of Lady Constance."

"How so, Bertha?"

Bertha paid no attention to the question. "Lady Hermione and Lady Sibyl were wiser than Lady Constance. They have their houses in town and country; their own maids; their carriages; and as many dresses in a season as they like to order."

"But Lady Constance, Bertha?"

"Well, miss, Lady Hermione and Lady Sibyl each married a rich young gentleman as was something in the city; and Lady Hermione has a house in Park Lane, and Lady Sibyl a mansion in Grosvenor Square, whilst poor Lady Constance, I'm told, isn't married at the present hour."

"But why—why?" exclaimed Agnes petulantly.

"It's a long story, miss. My lady the countess used to come into the room as I was laying out the young ladies' dresses, and

entreat me, with tears in her dear eyes, to do what I could with Lady Constance. But it was of no manner of use, miss. There was a young banker after her, and the eldest son of a lord, and I don't know how many more; but she wouldn't have nothing to say to none of them. They said in the housekeeper's room as how she loved a curate down in the country, who was that poor that he couldn't keep a common wife, let alone one like Lady Constance. My lady was furious, they said, when she came to hear about it, and ordered him out of the house, where he's never set a foot since that very day."

"Poor thing!" sighed Agnes.

"And she was pretty, too," murmured the abigail; "almost as pretty as yourself, miss. It seems a sad pity that a young lady should throw away her chances when she might have anything she wanted for the asking."

Later that evening, Agnes was alone with her mother in the old parlour. Blanche and Arthur were strolling in the garden, and Mr. Hardyng had not left the dining-room. Agnes was musing about Lady Constance and her unfortunate attachment. Then, by a natural process, her thoughts reverted to Martin and herself. How long it was since she had seen him! She wondered whether he still cared for her, or had fallen in love with some girl in Camptown; or, if not, whether their fate might not be similar to that of Lady Constance and her lover.

Mrs. Hardyng sat intently watching the varying shadows which flitted across her daughter's face. She had noticed her to be more self-occupied of late; to be given to longer reveries; and once or twice she had caught her eyes raised pityingly to Percy's melancholy countenance. She hailed these signs as the dawn of a better

future, but was far too wise to hasten its advent by direct interference. She watched and waited; studied the girl more closely; and determined, like Percy had done, to make her approaches by circuitous paths.

"Blanche and Arthur appear in no hurry to leave the garden, do they, dear?"

"No, mamma," said Agnes dreamily.

"He is evidently *épris;* and really, my love, although he does happen to be a clergyman, I do not think that Blanche could have done better. It will be a suitable match in every way."

"Blanche seems very fond of him."

"I was not exactly thinking about that, dear. Love in such cases is no doubt a most desirable adjunct, but is far from being essential. People in our position must consider wealth, rank, and the probability of favourable settlements. Marriages of affection, accompanied by love in a cottage, may meet the requirements of the lower

classes, or suit the pages of a novel, but may be inapplicable to persons of consideration."

"And yet, mother, Solomon says,—'Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.'"

Mrs. Hardyng moved uneasily in her chair.

"We have nothing, my dear, to do with hatred. Hatred is an attribute of the vulgar. But I wish you to understand that the stalled ox, even with possibly divergent tastes, is to be preferred to the dinner of herbs accompanied by a morbid sentimentality. Most fortunately," continued Mrs. Hardyng in her pleasantest manner, "we have not, in the present instance, to consider even a divergence of tastes. Blanche and Arthur would appear to have been absolutely born for each other. Their perceptions are identical; their respective ages most suitable. I am sorry for Martin;

but, really, his present circumstances cannot be laid at our door."

"Sorry for Martin?" exclaimed Agnes, with concern.

"Yes, my love. I understand that the Chudlegh estates are settled upon Arthur, and that Martin has nothing to look forward to beyond a share in the business at Camptown. Of course, my dear, I am perfectly ignorant about business—none of our family having been connected with it; but your father considers it to offer a most uncertain means of subsistence." And Mrs. Hardyng plied her needle as though she were talking about the most uninteresting of subjects.

A tear rose to the girl's eye as she thought of Martin and the precarious life to which he had been devoted. How far such a life appeared to remove him from herself. How unlikely it now seemed that her parents would consent to their union. Poor Martin! Would that he were a

soldier, and not engaged in mercantile pursuits. If that had been the case, perhaps— But it was useless to speculate on the impossible.

"By-the-by," continued Mrs. Hardyng, "Percy Todd is to dine with us to-morrow. We were most fortunate in being able to secure him at so short a notice. He is usually so deeply engaged—so much sought after by the county. But that is not to be wondered at. His position, his wealth —— Are you not well, dear?" she said kindly, and stopping short in her panegyric on observing that big tears were coursing each other down her daughter's cheek.

"Not quite, mamma. Perhaps I had better lie down for half an hour."

And, gathering her work together, Agnes left the room.

Mrs. Hardyng was inclined to rejoice at the turn which the conversation had

taken. She did not mind a few tears. Agnes was altogether different to Blanche. Had Blanche been the subject of her attack, she would not have dared to say to her what she had said to Agnes. The elder sister would most probably have kept her at arm's-length; have divined her policy; and proved passively resistant. She was even glad that Blanche was so engrossed with Arthur as to be unlikely to pay much attention to her sister. Were she, by any mischance, to do so, the fruition of her own schemes would be rendered far more difficult of attainment.

Nor had Mrs. Hardyng any scruples as to the rectitude of her conduct. The range of her vision was limited. She performed her orisons in the parish church on the first day of every seven—on the other six she was a slave to Mrs. Grundy and Sir Jabesh Windbag, and lived for a certain present rather than for an uncertain here-

after. In the home of her youth, religion had been a convenient mask, which at times could be assumed for the sake of a greater respectability, but which could be dropped at a moment's notice. She had, herself, married for position, not for love; and, although her life since that event had been in one sense irreproachable, it had remained so more for the sake of an easy congruity than from any more powerful considerations. What, then, could a few passing tears avail with her? If she could but deal by Agnes as her parents had dealt with herself, if she could but arrange this marriage with Percy Todd, all must be well and her conscience would experience no awkward qualms.

And Agnes. The girl was unable to disburden her soul before such a mother. She had a vague apprehension that, were she to do so, her sentiments would be misconstrued and the promptings of her

better nature be trodden under foot. Nor could she appeal to Blanche. Her sister was so downright; her questions would be so incisive; her ideas of right and wrong were so overstrained. She could see nothing except through Arthur's spectacles, and Arthur was so straightforward in all that he did or said. Agnes did not want that sort of comfort. She wanted someone who could sympathize with her, who would account her the most unfortunate of beings, with whom she could mingle her tears, and thereafter feel that she was the victim of circumstances. She liked Martin, of course. He had been her lover for so many years; but, after all, had it not been with a boyish love? Could she remain faithful to him as poor Lady Constance had remained faithful to her curate? Ah, well, she could but try. He was a dear fellow—so good and true. And then she threw herself upon the couch,

and her tears flowed more swiftly than before.

But neither Lady Hermione nor Lady Sibyl had suffered as she was then suffering. Both had married well, and were no doubt happy. Indeed, they must be far happier than their sister. How stupid it was of Lady Constance to fall in love with that impecunious curate, and she so pretty. Very nearly as pretty as herself, Bertha had said. And presently she began to think of self and to forget Martin.

She rose from the couch and stood before a mirror on the toilet-table. Her eyelids were swollen, and the brightness of her eyes was subdued by recent tears. And yet even so, she was pretty—very pretty. How sad it would be were her beauty to fade whilst she was waiting for a husband who might never come. Even if Martin loved her now, he might not do so when her first bloom had disappeared. Ah! if

he were only rich, like Arthur or Percy, she could have no doubt as to what it was best to do. But her mother had hinted at poverty and a precarious livelihood. She felt that she could not endure poverty. Upon second thoughts, the stalled ox seemed preferable to a dinner of herbs, even when sanctified by the presence of love. Certainly it was a great drawback that Percy was so plain, so uninteresting, but— And she rang the bell for Bertha, delaying any further investigation of her feelings until a more convenient season.

Mrs. Hardyng watched her narrowly during the following morning, but gained little if any information from her repeated observations. She knew that it would be dangerous to recommence the conversation which had terminated so abruptly the night before. Percy was to dine with them, and Agnes must not again be stirred to tears. She must trust solely to the leaven already

planted, and which, if it did not work, must be replaced at some future day by a larger quantity.

During that afternoon, Agnes roamed listlessly and alone about the garden. She visited the stews, and lay for a few minutes under one of the weeping willows. She thought of the many times when she had sat under that very tree with Martin, but after a mazed fashion and apathetically. Then she bethought of the paddock where, in her childhood and on Negro's back, she had flown the hurdles. She would go there —it did not much matter where she went— in any case such a visit would help to pass the dragging hours. She leaned against the gate and looked at the spot dreamily. Presently the scene recurred as vividly as though it had been enacted yesterday— Martin's care for her safety, his determination that she should not ride without a side-saddle, his tenderness in mounting her

when the saddle had been brought, the ecstatic joy of rushing round the field on the pony's back, how she had skimmed over the hurdles at Arthur's side, and the proud look with which her young lover had received her when she returned breathless and excited to where he stood. She remembered all this with a sigh of regret. And then she started. Two large tears, large as the premonitory drops which herald the coming thunderstorm, had fallen upon her clasped hands as they rested on the gate. She brushed them angrily, ruthlessly away. Percy must not see that she had been weeping, for was she not the thing destined to adorn his home?

She turned her back upon the paddock, and walked rapidly towards the house. She sought her room, and once more threw herself upon the couch. She felt half-stupefied, a victim hurried she scarcely knew whither. She cared not to dwell upon the future;

that would be sure to present itself too soon. She tried to sleep, but could not; and presently, going to the table, essayed to steady her excited nerves with a dose of *sal volatile*.

She had just returned to the couch when Bertha entered, and did so without knocking.

"I beg your pardon, miss," exclaimed the girl. "I did not expect as you were in the room;" and she endeavoured to conceal a something which she carried in her hand. But it was too late.

"What have you got there, Bertha?" inquired Agnes languidly.

"Really, miss, I shouldn't have dared—Indeed, miss, I shouldn't have thought of bringing it with me, if I had known that you were here."

"Nonsense, Bertha. What is it?"

"Only some flowers, miss," stammered the abigail.

"From Mr. Percy, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss."

"Then put them on the table, and return in half an hour."

At the appointed time Bertha reappeared to commence her duties. "What will you be pleased to wear in your hair, miss?" she inquired, when combing her young lady's fair, waved tresses.

Agnes had not given the matter a second's thought; but now, an idea flashed across her mind. What must be, must be. It was of no use to struggle against her fate.

"Two or three of those carnations will do as well as anything," she said coldly. "Not the white ones, you stupid girl—those with the spots and stripes."

Ah, well! The deed was done, and beyond recall. But let it pass. She could not endure the misery of another afternoon like that which had just now sped. She had no sort of inclination to tear the

carnations from her hair and to trample them under foot.

In the drawing-room her manner was cold and apathetic. The sunny Agnes of a month ago had given place to a pale, statuesque beauty, indifferent to aught that could happen.

Percy noted that his gift had been accepted, and his heart glowed with triumph. He shot at the girl one long, grateful glance as their hands met—the only manifestation which he permitted to his exultation—and again resumed the diffident, respectful attitude which he had of late so often feigned.

Agnes treated him even more frigidly than she had done before. If she was to be sold, to be bartered for consols, French rentes, and contiguous acres, the conditions of the contract should be distinctly understood. She would not attempt to simulate a love which she did not feel. Percy should

know the actual value of the thing which he was about to purchase. But, as the heart of woman is ever wayward and contradictory until truly given—an enigma which at times it is difficult even for herself to solve: a problem impossible to man until it has become his own—so, deep in the recesses of that heart, whose tenderness Agnes had thought to stifle, there may have existed a lurking hope that a studied, never-failing indifference might drive Percy from her side and leave the path clear for Martin. It was her last chance, and one to which she clung when, to all seeming, vanquished.

Mrs. Hardyng also noticed the carnations in her daughter's hair, and knew that they had not been grown at the Chase. The garden there was old-fashioned, like the house, and altogether guiltless of such bizarre novelties. She noticed, too, the extra coldness which Agnes had assumed.

But that did not trouble her repose. It would wear off, she thought, in the course of a few days. Girls did sometimes feel awkward when first they openly declared a preference for the man who was to be their husband.

But, notwithstanding the flattering unction by which Mrs. Hardyng had calmed her soul, the evening dragged its weary length more heavily, perhaps, than on any occasion when Percy had been there. Agnes seemed more indifferent to his attentions than ever, and it was a relief to all when he rose to take leave.

"You look pale, Miss Hardyng," he said, gently retaining the hand which Agnes proffered. "A brisk gallop would do you good. Your mother, I am sure, would have no objection to my taking you for a ride to-morrow afternoon."

"On the contrary, Mr. Todd. Indeed, it is most kind of you to think of such a

naughty girl. She will be delighted, of course."

"Shall it be before or after lunch, Miss Hardyng?"

"Whichever is most convenient," she replied.

"Then, let us say, after lunch."

"As you please, Mr. Todd."

"And you will remain to dinner, Percy, —*ça va sans dire.* Good night!" and the careful mother, lest anything should occur to frustrate so happy a conclusion, almost forced him to the door.

Agnes rode with Percy next day, and on many following days. She never refused to do so, nor feigned a headache as an excuse for non-compliance. Only—she retained the same cold mask which she had worn that night. At no time did she break through her reserve or permit a tender word to escape her lips. Percy was mortified, piqued. This was not the triumph

that he had pictured to himself. He would have had her softened, subdued, keenly alive to the honour which he was ready to bestow, or at least rejoicing at the prospect of that great wealth which he could lay at her feet. If he were to propose, he knew that he should be accepted. He could claim her body at any moment, but the soul would remain unfettered. That was but half a triumph. When he spoke, if ever he were to speak, he must be the sure master of both soul and body. Each day he chafed under the hard yoke which she had laid upon his neck, and endeavoured to remove it by submission to her every whim. But, unfortunately, her whims were so few as to afford a scanty basis from which to work. At one time he thought of appealing to Mrs. Hardyng, yet could not quite reconcile himself to that. Rather, he would wait and scheme, trust in Bertha, and to the effect of his great, apparent devotion.

And this, so far as Agnes and Percy were concerned, was the position of affairs when Martin returned to spend that long-looked-for holiday under the old roof-tree.

CHAPTER III.

BRIGHTER PROSPECTS.

But Martin did not know all this. When Agnes left him so suddenly, and he stood alone on the spot where he had poured forth his love, his first feeling was one of stupefaction. He reseated himself upon the bench, and gazed vacantly at the leafless rose-trees. From them his eye wandered to the tall, sweet-briar fence and thick nut-coppice, both appearing so irretrievably barren in their winter nakedness. Was his life thenceforth to be as theirs was now, sterile and unfruitful? Had the tender foliage of his spring-time departed, never to return? Must the ripened fruit of his in-

tense desire, ungathered by loving hands, fall miserably to earth—there to perish unheeded and uncared for, like those grub-eaten, rotting hulls beneath yonder trees? He could not tell; nor, in the first blush of his disappointment, did he seek to ascertain. He felt numbed. There was nothing at his feet to shadow the faintest gleam of hope.

In mute prostration he lifted his eyes to where the sun was still beaming in its grey-blue temple. He listened to the linnets which were prattling to their fellows in the trees hard by. These spoke to him of a life still present, of a future that could never die. And Martin gazed and listened, until his thoughts were more composed.

Perhaps he had been too precipitate, and frightened where he but meant to soothe. He was always too headstrong, and made for his object without regard of consequences. He had spoken to Agnes as though she

were a thing of iron, as though her nature were as tough as his own, had, indeed, spoken to her as abruptly as he would have done to the Globe-trotter or Ernest Clegg. What a fool he had been! What a miserable, misguided, twice-dubbed fool. He had actually blurted out his love during the first five minutes that they had been alone, and that after an absence of several months. No wonder that she had rushed from him in the way she did. Yet, despite his awkwardness, had she not prayed Heaven to bless him; had she not called him "dear"? There could be no question about that: he had not forgotten her least word. And, no doubt, she loved him now as she had always loved him—always, ever since they had been boy and girl together. At which thought Martin smiled, and a gladness, wonderful to be seen, overspread his face.

Mrs. Hardyng might not be inclined to forward his views—might even have

tampered with the girl whilst he was absent. He considered the latter circumstance to be far from improbable. The wider experience of society and its ways which he had gleaned in Camptown enabled him to gauge her character more accurately than he had done before leaving Chudlegh. He appreciated now, only too well, that she was ambitious; that she had a well-rooted antipathy to younger sons, and a great admiration for tinsel, machine-made jewellery, Brummagem ware, and plated goods of every sort and kind. Her reception of him that morning had but confirmed an opinion which had gradually been forcing itself upon his mind. Yet, what did it signify? If Agnes loved him, he could endure a little opposition from her mother. Against Mrs. Hardyng's contrariety could be set Mr. Hardyng and Blanche's friendship. Ah! That gave him a new idea. There was to be a shooting party at Chudlegh the next

day but one, and Mr. Hardyng would be there. He would speak to him about his love; he would tell him that he could keep a wife, that he had cared for Agnes all these years, and obtain permission to continue his addresses. That done, there could no longer be any great opposition to his wishes, and success would be assured. In the mean time, he would not harass Agnes by his presence. The separation was not likely to be prolonged for more than a couple of days—and what were a couple of days after an absence of several months? In two days Agnes would have regained her composure, and besides, she already knew how great his love.

Stimulated by which reflections, he returned to the Hall in quite good spirits. If he had not attained all that he could have desired, he was on the high road to do so. He had, at all events, made sure that he was not forgotten. He paced the

terrace that night with far different feelings to those of the previous evening. He even repeated lingeringly, softly to himself that refrain of his boyish days—

> "Keep not standing fixed and rooted,
> Briskly venture, briskly roam;
> Head and hand, where'er thou foot it,
> And stout heart are still at home."

Then he leaned over the balustrade and considered the rising moon. Its soothing calm spoke gentle music to his heart. Agnes might be regarding it at that very moment; and, if she were, surely it must allay her fears, induce tranquillity to her breast, and direct her thoughts towards himself.

Enthralled by these visions of his own creation, he did not, for a long time, seek to re-enter the house; but, when he did so, all within seemed changed to what it had been yesternight. The shadows on the ceiling greeted him as friends whom he had known for years; the echo of his

footfall in the passages awoke pleasant memories of home and childhood. And why? Because the soul of man is changeful as the ocean; because it owes more to hallucination than to certain apprehension; because "the imagination, which is altogether constructive, probably contributes more to our happiness than the reason, which, in the sphere of speculation, is mainly critical and destructive." Why is it," said Luther's wife, looking sadly back upon the sensuous creed which she had left, "that in our old faith we prayed so often and so warmly, and that our prayers are now so few and so cold?" Alas, O why?

And Martin was to be made still happier. The family were lingering over a nine-o'clock breakfast when the butler entered, carrying a salver thickly spread with letters. The squire turned them over with comparative indifference and yet distrustfully,

as if he recognized, beneath their covers, an accession to that day's work from which he would readily have been absolved. At last he came to one bearing the London post-mark, and which he regarded more attentively—one which, from the monogram on its back, had been written from the Parthenon. The Parthenon was a club to which Mr. Hardyng belonged, and the address was in his well-known hand.

Mr. Ffrench tore open the envelope, and presently a smile of satisfaction not only crossed, but continued to illumine his features.

"It's from Hardyng, Mary. He writes that he has arranged with Mathews's solicitors for Arthur to take possession any time after the first of January."

"Then, Ichabod, I suppose that everything may be considered as settled?"

"Everything, dear. He mentions that he has written to his wife to that effect,

and telegraphed to Blanche to return home without delay."

Mrs. Ffrench looked supremely happy, and cast a glance of mingled love and pride at her elder son.

"But what is it all about, governor?" exclaimed Martin, who felt that he had verily and indeed been left out in the cold. "Do you mean that Arthur is to have the living?"

"Yes, my boy. And something beyond the living—eh, Arthur?"

"I hope so, father; something worth more than a dozen livings. I shall ride over to the Chase after breakfast," he continued, turning to his mother, "and find out when Blanche may be expected."

A new light broke upon Martin. The cause of his brother's confusion that first night of his return became clear.

"Arthur! I am so glad," he cried eagerly. "Blanche will make you an

awfully good wife! I really believe that you must have been born for each other," he continued, employing almost the very words which Mrs. Hardyng had addressed to Agnes. Nor did he pretend a joy which he did not feel. He admired his brother, and was pleased at this successful issue to his love. Then, Arthur's engagement was a step in the right direction. It would cement a closer connection between the two families, and cause the realization of his own hopes to be far more probable.

Mrs. Ffrench regarded him anxiously. In her affection for Arthur she had forgotten Martin. She had been astonished at his cheerful bearing the night before, and now was yet more struck by his manifest elation. Of course she knew something about his attachment to Agnes —everybody did. But, whilst most people regarded it as a boyish penchant which would die a natural death, as most such

penchants do, she appreciated more than others her son's straightforward character and singleness of aim. She believed that his love, when once it had been given, would be heartfelt, deep, and she dreaded the effect of disappointment. Percy's frequent visits to the Chase had not escaped her attention any more than Mrs. Hardyng's predilection in his favour. Her woman's wit had enabled her to fathom the latter's object, and, having done so, she trembled.

"And you, Martin?" she inquired nervously, "what shall you do without Arthur, this morning?"

"Have a talk with Linn, mother. I have not seen him yet."

"Then you will not be going to the Chase?"

"No, mother. I saw Agnes, you know, yesterday. I shall not go there again until Friday, at the earliest."

Mrs. Ffrench uttered an almost imper-

ceptible sigh of relief. Perhaps he was not so deeply smitten, after all. Perhaps he had ridden to the Chase yesterday simply out of politeness to such old neighbours.

After breakfast Martin took his way to the keeper's lodge — a pretty cottage, with ornamental gables and rustic porch, surrounded by a neat garden and well-grown orchard of apple and pear trees, and with, in a sunny spot not far from the door, the kennels wherein a young Juno and Timon spent the greater portion of their lives. As he trod the narrow path which at times led across now resting meadows and bare fallows, at times traversed wide patches of turnips alive with sheep, his heart felt light, and he dismissed all weightier matters whilst thinking of to-morrow's sport. Arthur had told him that there were plenty of pheasants, but had given him little, if any, information as to the stock of ground game. And if there were

one thing more than another that Martin loved, Agnes of course being excepted, it was a snap shot at a rabbit as it darted across the narrow ride of a furze-field or scurried from bramble-bush to bramble-bush beneath an oak-wood.

As he neared the keeper's lodge he noticed that a thin column of smoke was rising from an outhouse chimney. Linn, then, was at home, and no doubt occupied in cooking for the dogs—a surmise that proved correct. Martin found him standing over a copper which emitted anything but a savoury odour.

"Eh, sir, be that you?" exclaimed Linn, as Martin's figure darkened the doorway. "I'm glad to see you anyway, sir. An' how be they all at Camptown?"

Martin laughed. "Rather a difficult question, Linn. There happen to be a good many thousand people in the place."

"Then it mun be a sight bigger than Chudlegh. More like Kirkford maybe?"

"Bigger than fifty Kirkfords, Linn."

"Then it mun be a terror of a place. Be it as big as Lunnon now, Mister Martin?"

"No. But it's damper, and blacker, and quite as crowded."

"An' have yer got to live there all yer life, sir?" asked Linn pityingly.

"God forbid!" ejaculated Martin.

"Well, I'm glad on that, sir; or maybe you'd be a-pining of yerself away. But it mun be fearsomely different to Chudlegh."

"Yes," acquiesced Martin, with a sigh; "it's different to Chudlegh. But look here, Linn," he exclaimed, casting all recollection of his life at Camptown to the winds. "What sport are we likely to have to-morrow? Are there many rabbits this year?"

"The Sparrow Copse is chock full o' them, an' there's a good few in th' furze-field at the Dingles."

"And how about hares?"

"There's a fair sprinkling at the Dingles and in Snoxall Wood. But I reckon we shan't find ne'er a one in th' Sparrow Copse. The rabbits be a mort too thick down there."

"All the better, Linn. We shall get more shooting."

"Yer may well say that, Mister Martin. They're packed a'most as close as herrings in a barrel; an' I've had a couple of men, sin' yesterday, a-ferritin an' stoppin holes."

"And you have beaters enough?"

"I'm pretty well off for they. The bailiff 'ullsend us half a dozen, an' Master Stedman, he's promised two or three from the garden. Then Master Killick an' Master Street 'ull be sure to bring a couple or so along wi' they. I suppose, sir, yer wouldn't like a few beagles from the street?"

"Confound the varmints — no! They would run all over the shop. I expect we shall get one or two as it is—they're always

ready for a start when the first shot is fired."

"I'd best take my gun, Mister Martin. I've got some sparrow-shot i' the lodge as 'ull do em a mort o' good."

"Maybe you had," cried Martin, laughing. "But, whatever you do, don't let my father know the wherefore. He's altogether too tender of the brutes."

"Yer leave that to me, sir; I won't make no fuss afore the squire. I'd better bring along the terriers, though; they'll keep the rabbits moving in the furze."

"By all means, Linn. They are very beggars at that sort of work. Furze don't seem to make the least impression on their wiry coats." And then, Linn having brought his culinary operations to a successful issue, they went to look after the ferreters.

Next morning by half-past nine the beaters had assembled in the stable-yard.

They formed a motley crowd of every height and age, but one which was evidently accustomed to the work in hand. Their legs were cased in gaiters reaching more than halfway up the thigh; their clothes were protected by old smocks pulled together at the waist by a leather strap; and each carried in his hand a stout, long stick. In view of the arduous work on which they were so soon to be engaged, they were making an early lunch, or possibly a late breakfast, off great hunks of bread seasoned by huge slices of cheese, and which were rendered more palatable by the long draughts of beer that Linn circulated in cups of horn. The squire was generous in the matter of his beer. He liked the men thoroughly to enjoy their day, and held a good square meal at starting to be a most important factor in promoting such an end.

In the yard, too, were the terriers—

Boxer, Punch, Teazer, and Myrtle—short-legged, long-haired, determined animals, that would stick each to its own rabbit and drive the same until it was fain to cross a ride or make a bolt for the open. They were intensely ugly, but at the same time looked intensely sagacious, and no doubt knew what was about to follow quite as well as their two-footed companions.

By ten the party had left the Hall, and was making its way towards the Dingles, which lay at the foot of the hill and not far from the turnpike road. The copse had evidently been planted with an eye to sport. A furze-field stood at one end, and next to the furze-field, a strip of tall spruces, whose dark foliage formed an excellent roosting-place for pheasants. Then came a piece of underwood, and lastly an extensive coppice of oak-trees—the latter carpeted with matted fern and bramble. Narrow rides had been cut both around and across

the furze-field, dividing it into convenient blocks, and it was there that the day's shooting was to commence. Linn stationed the guns, and, having marshalled his beaters, threw them into the thick cover. Boxer, with his companions, followed at their heels, and in less than half a minute a series of quick, sharp barks announced that the rabbits were astir. First came a single report from the left, then a double on the right, until presently the place resounded with a steady fusillade, and clouds of smoke floated lazily above the gorse. This continued until the last block had been worked, and the beaters, thorn-laden and flushed, after nearly two hours' work, emerged at the farther end.

"Whatever the bag, we've spoiled enough powder," exclaimed the squire, as they rested for a minute or so before entering the firs and underwood beyond. "Hallo, lad, want more cartridges already?" he

continued, as Percy dipped his hand into a bag carried by one of the beaters.

"I think, sir," remarked Linn, raising a forefinger to his cat-skin cap, "as Mister Todd have fired away about twice as many cartridges as any o' you other gentlemen."

"They're desperate hard to kill," said Percy. "It takes a many shots to bag a single rabbit."

"Never mind, Todd," interposed Martin kindly. "Let fly well in front of their noses and you can't miss."

Percy explained that he should soon warm to the work, although in his heart he possessed no great confidence in the assertion.

"He wud like to see 'em floating on a pond, as when he shot Master Killick's ducks," whispered Linn to a beater. "He'll ne'er make a shot, won't Mister Todd. He's a reg'lar Lunnoner, that's wot he is."

"Come, lads; let's be pushing on," shouted the squire. "We've lots to do before lunch!" And then they walked through the firs and birch underwood, knocking down several pheasants and rolling over more than a dozen hares before they reached the farther side.

"Now, Linn," said the squire, "take Mr. Hardyng and Master Killick, and place them in the field between this and Snoxall Wood. Both pheasants and hares are sure to make that way."

"Yes, sir," returned the keeper, and he motioned the two to follow him along a winding bypath through the oak-wood. But now, if ever, was Martin's opportunity.

"You stay with the beaters, Linn," he hastened to interpose. "I know exactly where they ought to go." And he hurried off, with the others at his heels.

"Will you stand at that corner?" he said to Killick, as they emerged from the wood,

and pointing to the left. "I'll take Mr. Hardyng with me. You see, we can stand back to back," he explained to his remaining companion, "and you can take anything that comes one way, and I what goes the other. We shall make a good bag like that, for it ought to be a warm corner."

Martin knew that he should have a few minutes at his disposal. It would take some time to work through the oak-wood. Possibly a stray pheasant might rocket above the trees, but at first the guns in front of the beaters would have the cream of the shooting. He could not have chosen a better time in which to broach the matter that lay so near his heart. There would be no opportunity so good in the afternoon. It would be almost dark by four o'clock, and the shooting in Sparrow Copse must, he knew, be both fast and furious. And yet he felt nervous now that the critical moment had arrived. He would have given

a good round sum to find that the next five minutes had been safely bridged. He still hesitated to speak, when shot echoing after shot, each one nearer than the last, warned him that he must delay no longer. Then, all at once, he took a headlong dive, and plunged *in medias res.*

"I want to say a few words to you, Mr. Hardyng. You know that I am awfully in love with Agnes—have been, indeed, ever since I was a boy."

Mr. Hardyng looked at him kindly. "Has she any idea as to your feelings, Martin?"

"Why—yes—I think so," he stammered. "The fact is," he continued, looking frankly at his companion, "I spoke to her on the subject—the day before yesterday."

"And what did she say?" inquired the other, interested beyond measure in a well-loved daughter's future.

"She dropped a few tears, and ran to the

house before I could finish what I had to say. But she called me, 'dear;' and prayed Heaven to bless me. I think—nay, I feel sure—that she loves me."

"Well, my boy, I could wish for no better son-in-law. And yet—one moment. Are you in a position to support a wife? Could you keep Agnes in comfort—I will not say in luxury?"

"I should not have dared to broach the subject if I could not. I have toiled for years, and to that end. At times the work has been dreary and hard to bear, but—I had a rich prize in view."

"In that case, my dear fellow, I have no other question to put. If you can persuade Agnes to say 'yes,' you have nothing to fear from me."

Martin's face brightened. One portion of a great load had, at all events, been lifted from his heart.

"You are very good," he murmured, and

then the sound of the guns, drawing nearer, reminded him that the conversation could not endure for ever. But he had something more to say.

"You will pardon the remark, I know," he continued; "but it has occurred to me that an engagement between Agnes and myself might not be altogether acceptable to her mother."

A troubled look stole into Mr. Hardyng's face. He recalled many circumstances which induced him to think that such a surmise might be correct—Percy's frequent visits which his wife had so evidently encouraged; the oft-repeated rides which the pair had lately taken; the girl's utter self-negation and extreme depression. He should by no means be pleased to have Percy for a son-in-law. And yet, such a contingency appeared to be within the regions of possibility. Notwithstanding, he placed a hand on Martin's shoulder, and said—

"If you can obtain my daughter's consent, you have nothing to fear."

"Then may I come to the Chase tomorrow morning?" asked Martin excitedly.

"Say in the afternoon. In the morning I shall be at Kirkford, and it may be better for you to feel that I am at home and that you have a warm friend at hand in case of need."

The pheasants had begun to leave the copse, and the hares to peep timidly from out the fence—sure signs that their foe was drawing near.

Already two or three birds, despite Killick's cry of "Mark!" had flown by unheeded and found a refuge in Snoxall Wood. So that both Mr. Hardyng and Martin felt that it was high time to retrieve their character—a decision at which they arrived none too soon. Whizz came the birds above their heads, only to fall beneath their unerring guns; out came

the hares, racing with the wind, to turn long, triple somersaults on the turf. Mr. Hardyng was a reputed shot, and Martin that day was stimulated by a happiness which compelled his arm and strengthened his eye.

"You seem to have been in the thick of it, Hardyng!" cried the squire, when he had climbed the fence. "Martin, there, knows all the most likely corners on the place. But you should have come back, sir, and taken pot-luck with the others. You don't get away like that again, to-day."

"It has been rather a good spot, father, I must own."

"Well, well, sir. And now let's have a turn at Snoxall Wood, and then some of us, I expect, will be ready for lunch. It was hungry work trudging through yonder copse."

A day in the Chudlegh covers was always calculated to promote a good appe-

tite. There were very few quiet corners in which the sportsmen could stand, waiting for the game to be driven to their feet or to swoop above their heads. On the other hand, there was much labouring through tall underwoods and over bramble-covered bottoms, much running hither and thither to get a sight of the rabbits, which Boxer and Teazer drove from bush to fern and from fern to bush, many shouts of "Mark, mark!" and much wiping of moist foreheads. Nor had the proceedings of that morning proved an exception to the rule. If anything, there had been more game on foot than usual, necessitating a corresponding increase in the action of both legs and lungs.

Perhaps none of the party had shouted louder or enjoyed themselves more than had Master Street and Master Killick. Good country-side sportsmen, armed with muzzle-loaders, hampered by ramrods, and

with thick fingers for ever fumbling in their waistcoat pockets for another cap, they had shot pretty straight and added their full quota to the bag. To them, a day or two among the rabbits at Christmas time was an incalculable relief from the routine of their daily life. It brought them into closer contact with their betters, and formed the subject of many a pleasant reminiscence during the next twelve months. No one heard a word spoken against the Game Laws at Chudlegh. In that happy parish the indignant diatribes of Brummagem orators as to the iniquity of such laws fell upon careless ears. The farmer shot the covers side by side with his landlord. The villagers enjoyed their week with the beagles after the turn of the new year. But, most unfortunately, all places are not so blest, nor are all landlords as were Mr. Hardyng and the squire: from which it has come about that a selfish egoism

has given a handle to politicians on the stump.

And, as hard work is the best prelude to a good appetite, so, perhaps, no one that day enjoyed his lunch in the kitchen of the bailiff's old farm-house more than did Master Street and Master Killick. They made little account of a large plateful of "cottage pie," and proceeded to fill what gaps remained with thick slices from a round of corned beef. They rejected all offers of sherry, and remained steadfast to the squire's home-brewed October.

"Sherry be a sickly kind o' stuff," said Master Street.

"'Tain't no manner of good to work on," remarked, dogmatically, Master Killick.

"Nay; but," exclaimed the squire, when the good men had finished their long innings, "at least you must take one glass of wine. I've got a toast to give that it would never do to omit on such an occasion.

Hand round the port," he continued to the butler, "and fill every glass to the brim."

"If it be a toast, squire, I doan't so much care if I *do* oblige ye," said Master Street.

"An' port's warmer nor sherry on the top o' good ale," said Master Killick.

"Then—here's to our new rector," exclaimed the squire, when the glasses had been charged. "May he live to a ripe old age, and 'set up his son after him.'"

"Here's to our new rector!" went round the table, as the wine was raised to every lip—to every lip except Arthur's.

"An' who be him, Mister Ffrench?" asked Master Killick.

"An' why doan't Mister Arthur a-take his port?" inquired Master Street.

The squire laughed. "Because Arthur is our new rector, gentlemen!"

"Now, be him?" said Master Street. "An' you'll make one of the right sort, Mister Arthur."

"That un will!" echoed the other. "I shouldn't wonder now, Mister Arthur, but what yer'll be looking arter a lady fur to keep yer house warm?"

Arthur blushed, and the squire came to his assistance.

"I shouldn't wonder but what he's found one, Killick. Another bottle," he added to the butler; "and then, gentlemen, I'll give you one more toast." Presently, rising to his feet, and with what looked like a tear glistening in his old eye, he exclaimed—

"Miss Hardyng, gentlemen! May happiness attend her path!"

"Darned if I ain't glad!" said Master Street, putting down his empty glass, and thumping the table with his heavy fist. "And so 'ull the missus be, for sure now."

"We see'd the two on you christened," cried Master Killick. "Wun may call it a 'spensation o' Providence—it keeps all on us so snug and homelike."

Arthur, having shaken his two friends warmly by the hand, suggested that it was time to make a start.

"You had better fill your shot-bag, Killick," said Martin, when they stood outside the house. "You'll want all that you can carry."

"Aye," said Linn, who, with his beaters, was waiting at the door. "There's a sight o' rabbits in the Sparrow Copse. Belike, Mister Martin, us had best go there fust?"

"It's half-after two now, father, and will be quite dark in less than a couple of hours. We can leave the spinnies between this and the copse for another day."

"Do what you like, my boy, only be quick about it."

"Then let us make for the 'Sparrow,' Linn, straight-away. Don't you think though, that we had better leave the terriers? They look pretty groggy on their feet."

"Best take 'em, sir. They'll warm up to it after a bit."

Linn did not prove to be a false prophet. Once arrived at the Sparrow Copse, the fun grew fast and furious. The fusillade of the morning was converted into a cannonade. A continuous discharge rent the air, and the welkin was obscured by a canopy of smoke suspended in the moistening atmosphere, where it remained immovable and ever thickening. Old villagers remember that day to the present hour;—how they stood at their doors and hearkened to the din, and thought that, "By the Lord Harry, the squire must be making a foine bag the day." And did any jealousy taint their hearts with bitterness? Not in the least, ye great orators of the stump! They knew that on the morrow would come a leash of rabbits to every cottage-home, and that, in addition to their dry white bread, they should enjoy a savoury stew.

Dark twilight at length obscured the Sparrow Copse. Each minute the flashes of the guns showed more distinctly, and soon it was impossible to distinguish the harassed rabbits as they scurried from bush to bush. Then came the last great event of the day —the counting of the spoil in the stable-yard.

"Well, Linn! What do you make it?" cried the squire, as Linn approached, holding a dirty piece of paper in his hand.

"Three hundred and fourteen rabbits, sir, forty-five hares, an' sixty-two pheasants."

"Not a bad day's work—eh, Hardyng? Over four hundred head, all told."

"Very good," returned the other.

"You'll come into the house before you go?" suggested the squire.

"I'd rather not, Ffrench; and I dare say Arthur wants to be off. He sleeps at the Chase, you know, to-night. Good night,

squire. Good night, Martin," he continued, turning to his young friend. "Don't forget to-morrow afternoon. I'll take all reasonable care that Agnes is at home to entertain you."

Words which Percy heard, and over which he long-time pondered that self-same night.

CHAPTER IV.

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

Between three and four hours after Linn had counted the game, the dining-room at Chipping Manor was looking snugly comfortable. Two pairs of candles, mounted in silver candlesticks, stood upon the table and shed a soft light about the room. The servants had retired. A wood fire crackled and blazed upon the hearth—a fire not too scorching, but cheerful in its self-merriment, and pleasantly suggestive of woodland property. On either side the chimney sat Percy and his father, each in a deep arm-chair. Between them was a small table, bearing a plate of wafer-biscuits, a

couple of claret-glasses, and a bottle of Cos d'Estournel, vintage 1853. The bottle rested in a small basket fitted with a screw lever, by which it could be drained to the last drop without disturbing the tender crust that coated its lower side. But, so far, it remained untouched, and a long silence continued unbroken.

Percy was arrayed in the finest of black velveteen. Red silk stockings adorned his slender legs. Patent leather shoes, irradiated by steel buckles, encased his feet. And yet, notwithstanding the magnificence of his appearance, he was by no means happy. That evening his tailor had failed to soothe; the "Philosophy of Clothes" had proved a barren study; the seed-grain planted in his breast that day troubled his repose. In short, Mr. Hardyng's last words to Martin had been as nauseous to his ear as could the odour of bruised hemlock have been to his olfactory nerves.

Then, his father's presence disturbed the current of his thoughts. He must think over what he had heard, presently and when alone. He could do so far more calmly then than beneath his father's eye.

Nor could this be wondered at. Mr. Todd's eyes had something catlike about them, something which irritated, for all they looked so expressionless and cold. They did not permit the beholder to explore their depths, their meaning, or solicitude. They were eyes which absorbed more than they evolved, which were not fair-dealing, and therefore not to be relied upon. They were not very dissimilar to Percy's, so that possibly he understood them better than most people, and disliked them in inverse proportion to his greater power of discernment.

When not gazing at his son, Mr. Todd gazed at the fire. But he did both without bending his head. His deep, white neck-

cloth was too highly starched for that to be possible. He sat erect and rigid, his elbows upon the arms of his chair, his hands turned backward from the wrist, the tips of the fingers and thumb of his left hand in nice contact with those of his right. His coat was narrow-breasted; its sleeves and the legs of his trousers fitted tightly to his limbs; his waistcoat was buttoned high upon the chest. A halo of pompous dignity enveloped him about; but with the dignity of a Dombey, and not of a duke. It savoured of the City, and had been built upon a foundation of concrete wealth. Many years of country life had been unable to dim its lustre, and, were he to attain the age of Methuselah, it would, without a doubt, descend with him to the grave.

At last Mr. Todd broke a silence which was becoming unendurable. Although neither father nor son had uttered a word for at least ten minutes, each had acted

upon the other as do two similarly electrified bodies when brought into near contact.

"You appear fatigued," he said. "Suppose we attack the Cos d'Estournel."

Percy filled the glasses; half emptied his own, and, after an absent fashion, toyed with a wafer-biscuit. Mr. Todd passed his glass two or three times beneath his nose before proceeding to test the wine on his palate.

"A delicate bouquet—very," he murmured. "Perhaps a little wanting in body; but agreeable—very agreeable, and in fine order."

"It's not half bad," remarked the other carelessly.

"I consider it to be most excellent," said Mr. Todd in a measured voice. "Not, of course, that I rank it with Lafite, but it is a wine that any man might be proud to have in his cellar. I much doubt whether Ffrench has got anything to touch it."

"Perhaps not," retorted Percy irritably. For Percy, although at one with his father as to the importance attaching to wealth and all that it could bring, had become wearied of these perpetual allusions to the quality of their cellar, to the blood in their stable, and their position in the county—at least, when they were alone. At such times the halo of pompous dignity, which never deserted the elder man, tortured his nerves. He could upon occasion dissemble, like his father, but preferred sometimes to lay aside the mask and give free vent to his natural disposition. He had never sunned himself in the golden atmosphere which veils the City magnate, and converts him into a nineteenth-century Zeus; nor had he cleansed his inner man by assuming a white neckcloth. In these respects his education had been neglected; but he was a fair specimen of that modern product which, whilst possessing wealth, scorns

the processes by which it has been accumulated; whose will is the only god it knows; which can worm but not work; which clings desperately to life, even when life has grown fade and valueless. The nerves of such a product are readily affected. It conceives umbrage when no umbrage is intended; so it happened that Mr. Todd's remarks stirred Percy's irritation.

"You appear hipped, my dear boy," resumed Mr. Todd in his calmest tone. "Has anything occurred during the day to wound your susceptibilities?"

"You may not have heard that Martin Ffrench is not only at home, but making up to Agnes in the old way?" said Percy viciously.

"Not a word to that effect," returned Mr. Todd phlegmatically.

"Nor that Blanche is engaged to Arthur?"

"No."

"Then I trust that the intelligence may

prove more gratifying to you than it has to me."

"But why disturb yourself about such trifles?"

"Because Mr. Hardyng favours Martin, and Agnes does not care one iota what becomes of me. Because Arthur's engagement to Blanche will unite the two families more closely. Because, in short, I shall be left out in the cold."

Mr. Todd slightly pressed the tips of his fingers more closely together, whilst his expressionless eyes stared vacantly into futurity.

"So—so," he murmured.

"And Martin is to have an interview with Agnes to-morrow afternoon!"

"Exactly. To-morrow afternoon—yes, to-morrow afternoon. And meanwhile?"

Had his father ever been more irritating than at that moment? Percy thought not.

"What can I do in the meanwhile?"

he exclaimed petulantly. "By this time Mr. Hardyng has no doubt told the girl of Martin's intended visit. She is already prejudiced against me, and her sympathy will revert to him."

"Exactly so—exactly," repeated Mr. Todd, gently tapping the fingers of his right hand against the back of his left.

"The game is as good as lost," continued Percy doggedly.

"Young people are so apt to be discouraged. When the sun shines in a clear sky, they can walk alone; when the clouds thicken, they require a guide. I suppose, now, that Mrs. Hardyng has not been less predisposed in your favour since Martin's arrival?"

"Perhaps not," retorted Percy. "But what of that?"

"And Agnes, as you happened to mention last night, rode with you yesterday; that is—after she had seen Martin."

"You have a good memory, father."

"Exactly so—exactly. Martin, it seems, is due at the Chase to-morrow afternoon. Mr. Hardyng will be with me at the County Asylum in the morning. Blanche and Arthur will be cooing like turtle-doves. And—— But your glass is empty, my dear lad, pray fill it up. Then, pull the bell and tell your fellow to take a lamp into the smoking-room." After which exordium Mr. Todd crossed one leg comfortably over the other, and sipped his claret with evident relish. Even when his son rose, he gave no signs of an intention to relinquish his chair.

"Are you not coming, father?" demanded Percy.

"No, my dear boy. I have led you to a knee-deep pasture, but cannot assist you to chew the cud. Smoke one of your best cigars; breakfast in your own room; and do not let me see your face before the after-

noon. God bless you, my boy. Good night!"

When Percy reached the smoking-room, he did what Mr. Todd had suggested—lighted one of the best cigars that he could find. The cigar, combined with the sensuous atmosphere of the room and the hope engendered by his father's words, soothed his irritation and encouraged thought.

"How 'cute the governor is," he soliloquized. "He keeps as cool as a cucumber when most men would be off their head. Not but what in the present instance he's something of an outsider, and outsiders see most of the game. Had our positions been reversed, I should, no doubt, have been every bit as cool myself. And, as it is, has he calculated the chances correctly? Is it not too late? Will not her love for Martin counterbalance the influence which I have brought to bear upon her vanity during the past few months? May the fellow be left to rot in the

nethermost hell," he muttered, grinding his teeth. "He has been the bane of my life—the obstacle which has ever blocked my path."

Then he set his lips firmly, whilst a cold, hard look invaded his face. The trouble which he had taken should not be in vain. He would ride to the Chase after breakfast, and bend Agnes to his will. It would not be the conquest that he had desired. He knew that her heart was no more his than it had been six months ago; that his triumph, if he could but triumph, and so far as the girl was concerned, would be an empty one. Yet it would stab Martin to the very soul, and perhaps blight his life for ever.

Not one drop of gratitude floated in Percy's veins. He was selfish, unscrupulous, utterly determined to wreak his vengeance, betide what might. He was the worthy son of his mother, the apt pupil of his father. He had noted Mr.

Hardyng's kindly smile as it rested on Martin a few hours before, and the smile had stung him to the quick. He had seen the answering glow which lighted Martin's face, and that glow had increased his hatred. Yes. He would go to the Chase in the morning, forestall that appointment for the afternoon, and deliver his thrust whilst yet it was in his power to do so.

He rang the bell and ordered his breakfast to be ready in the smoking-room by half-past nine. Then, having finished his cigar, he retired to bed, and not only slept, but slept soundly. Criminals, they say, have slept well the night before their execution. His nervous power, as theirs no doubt had been, might have become exhausted; the waste of bodily tissues have overpowered the anxiety of his mind; but, in any case, he slept—slept, too, as a new-born infant sleeps. Ah, well! A Love, far greater than a many seek to comprehend, "maketh

His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."

The majority of men, worthy the name of men, find a refuge from vicious tendencies in culture, in science, in a study of the phenomena of nature. But Percy cared for none of these things. He was endowed with no ambition which could save him from himself. His education had been so misdirected as to produce no chastening influence upon his character. The old church, as he passed it in the morning, was powerless to lighten the obscurity which reigned in his breast. It spoke to him of no sins forgiven, of no future life. Religion might offer its attractions to the rude peasant and to foolish women, but for him it possessed no life-sustaining power. To his mind, that Creed which has swayed the better portion of mankind for more than eighteen centuries, which has alleviated

sorrow in the four quarters of the globe, made the crooked straight and the rough smooth, was but as dross. The idol which he had set up in its place was Self; and self-will was the "Al Borak" on whose back he trusted to mount the skies.

Nor could Nature, any more than the old church, awaken his better instincts. The morning brightness appealed to his heart in vain. Its sunshine failed to disperse the clouds within. The birds warbling in the hedgerows spoke in unknown tongues. The hatred which he felt for Martin was fixed too firmly on its throne to be unseated.

And yet his idol was not omnipotent. It required a staff on which to lean, a counsellor to endorse its teaching. Nor can its feebleness be wondered at. For it was not weaker after its kind than other and similar idols after their kind. The heart of man must always have something on which to lean. If it discards Truth, it

must follow superstition. If it rejects good counsel, it must take up with bad. Self cannot stand by self alone. And so Percy found. Vindictive though he might be, he dared not to blight Martin's peace without a justification. He must expunge remorse by sophistry. He must be satisfied that the act which he contemplated did not overstep his legal rights.

Then he took unto his idol false prophets, and said unto them, "Shall I go up, or shall I forbear?"

To which they made answer, "Go up, and prosper. Art thou thy brother's keeper?"

Just so. That was the very argument to expunge remorse. Martin could have done yesterday what he himself was about to do to-day. Both stood on an equal footing, the contest was altogether fair, and let him win who could. He thrust behind his back the other's love; the in-

difference, nay, dislike, which Agnes had manifested towards himself; the hatred which incited him; and concluded that this venture of his would be strictly honourable, and within the "bill of rights."

That morning, Mrs. Hardyng was sitting in the parlour at the Chase, and, from the unruffled expression of her face, would seem to be in the enjoyment of an inward peace. "The world loves its butterflies;" and, conversely, its butterflies love the world. In fact, Mrs. Hardyng was not only a butterfly, but at that moment more enamoured of her world than usual. The first portion of the campaign in which she was engaged had been brought to a successful issue, and she was sanguine as to the prospects of her future operations. Blanche would bring to Arthur the living of Chudlegh and half the Lingfield estates; to balance which, the Chudlegh property was settled upon the girl's prospective husband. These in com-

bination would, when their present occupiers had gone the way of all flesh, not only enable the young couple to live in good style, but place them in a most excellent position. In the mean time, they could manage very well. The living was worth twelve hundred a-year, and the rectory was not only commodious, but in good repair. It was certainly to be regretted that Blanche must adopt the name of Ffrench, and that, so far as her branch of the family was concerned, the name of Hardyng would become a thing of the past. But the squire had been firm upon the point. He considered the surname of Ffrench to be quite as respectable as that of Hardyng; nor would he listen to her suggestion that the combination of Ffrench-Hardyng or of Hardyng-Ffrench was to be preferred. And, in view of the enormous interests at stake, she had refrained from pressing her wish.

But in the case of Agnes she was determined to be firm. It would be impossible to allude to her daughter as "Mrs. Todd." There was something so very plebeian in the sound. No. Percy at all events must adopt the name of Hardyng. She could endure to speak of the Todd-Hardyngs without her sensibilities being in the least degree affected. Nor did she think that Christopher Todd would prove impracticable. Her instinct whispered that he was the most unlikely man to prefer a vain shadow to the solid advantages which would accrue to Percy from an alliance with her daughter. Then, at Mr. Hardyng's death, the Todd-Hardyngs would no doubt live at the Chase, for the house and grounds were to fall to Agnes, in order to counterbalance the gift of the living to Blanche's husband. As for Chipping Manor, it would ultimately make a most excellent dower-house for the suc-

cessive widows of the Todd-Hardyng branch of the family.

Only once that morning did her thoughts revert to Martin. She was sorry now that he had appeared upon the scene so inopportunely. However, she comforted herself with the assurance that he had arrived too late to do much harm. She had watched Agnes narrowly, and had come to the conclusion that the girl's contest with herself was growing fainter, and that she was becoming habituated to the idea of a stalled ox. At the same time, she could not disguise from herself that the process had been more gradual than was quite convenient. But she was not so much alarmed at the effect of Martin's presence as at Percy's unaccountable reticence.

Mr. Hardyng had not alluded to Martin's prospective visit. He had thought it better not to do so. One morning's delay could not prove detrimental to the young fellow's

hope, and he preferred to approach his wife after the lad had spoken to Agnes. Then any opposition on her part would be more readily silenced, and that a certain degree of opposition might be expected he felt morally sure.

Talk or think about his satanic majesty, and he is certain to present himself. He is an unmistakably restless bird, never tired of hovering nigh to earth if only he can pick up a new client. And, as it invariably happens in such cases, Mrs. Hardyng had no sooner bewailed Percy's reticence than the door-bell rang, and the young man was ushered into the parlour. It was quite providential.

"This *is* an unexpected pleasure," she exclaimed, rising and putting out both her hands to welcome the new-comer. "How kind of you to call so soon! I suppose that you heard yesterday of dear Blanche's great happiness?"

"Only yesterday," replied Percy sympathetically. "And to-day, may I be permitted to congratulate the young lady herself?"

"I am afraid that she is not at home. Arthur monopolized her after breakfast, and she has not reappeared. It is so charming to see them together," she added enthusiastically. "Their affections are so deeply engaged—their sentiments so truly harmonize!"

"Your cup of happiness must indeed be full," said Percy.

"Ah yes," murmured the good mother, lifting her eyes thankfully to the ceiling. Then, gently lowering them, she turned her face from the visitor and sighed.

Percy did not feel sure about the sigh. It might mean an infinity of things—suspense, despair, sympathy, anxiety; what not? It would be safer to remain neutral, and permit the sigh to evolve itself.

"Yes. Nobody could be happier than Blanche," she continued, dwelling slowly upon the words. "And I could almost wish that she were an only daughter."

"Mrs. Hardyng!" exclaimed Percy, astonished out of his usual placidity, such a wish being the very last interpretation that he should have accorded to the sigh.

"I cannot wonder at your surprise, Percy. But I was thinking of Agnes. You can scarcely have failed to notice how pale she has lately grown."

Percy at last recognized the ground upon which he stood. If Mrs. Hardyng were an adept tactician, he was very little her inferior in the art. He perceived at once that she was playing straight into his hands.

"Indeed, I have," he returned. And, this time, he too sighed.

"She appears to grow paler and paler, and becomes more depressed each week. I really think that we must take her to

the Mediterranean after Christmas, and see what good a thorough change will effect."

"Can you assign no cause, dear Mrs. Hardyng, for so great an alteration?" inquired Percy anxiously.

"None. Except, indeed——" And she paused.

"Except?" said Percy insinuatingly.

Mrs. Hardyng appeared reluctant to complete the sentence.

"Really, Mr. Todd," she said at last, "I am not sure that I ought to say what I was about to do before so young a man. But your great sympathy induces me to believe that my confidence will not be abused. I am sadly afraid that Agnes is the victim of a hopeless attachment, and that Blanche's happiness has caused her to realize her own position more acutely."

After which *épanchement du cœur* Mrs. Hardyng raised her eyes sorrowfully to

Percy's face, and almost as immediately returned them to the carpet. Notwithstanding her outward calm, she felt the moment to be supreme, and trembled for the result. One thought alone sustained her. If Percy were to refuse her proffered gage, she had paved the way for a masterly retreat. Were he to leave the Chase as he had come, the hopeless attachment to which she had referred could be debited to Martin. But she had no need to have been under any apprehension. Percy had consulted his false prophets, and was determined to go up to the battle.

"Do you think," he said hesitatingly, "that *I* can in any way have contributed to her sorrow? Might I venture to hope that a word from my lips would return the colour to her cheek, and restore the Agnes whom we both so grieve to have lost?"

"Oh, Mr. Todd—oh, Percy!" exclaimed

the good mother, with a happy simulation of surprise.

"May I see her?" he continued. "Might I ascertain from herself whether I have most unintentionally been the source of her trouble?"

"But, Percy, are you sure that your feelings are deeply rooted, and that my hasty words have not stirred a compassion of which one day you may repent?"

"On my honour—no, Mrs. Hardyng."

"Then I will ask her to see you. But, be gentle—be kind, Percy." And she left the room.

Ah, Mrs. Grundy and Sir Jabesh Windbag! Ah, perverted, inverted Telescope! O Ops, most *inops!* Answerable are ye for many an unhappy home, for many a desecrated hearth, for marriage vows most foully broken. Have ye never read, or reading have ye not understood, that your damnation, unless ye repent, slumbereth

not, that it is sure—sure as that day succeeds to day and that night followeth after night?

But Percy dreamed not of so black a doom. On the contrary, he was highly elated by the turn which events had taken. Mrs. Hardyng had met him more than half-way, and had rendered his path far easier than it could otherwise have been. She was even clearer-headed than he had anticipated. She had made matters so perspicuously simple, and had brushed away all cobwebs so deftly, that he was lost in boundless admiration at her skill. If only Agnes could be induced to follow in her mother's steps, what an excellent helpmate she must prove to a would-be politician like himself. But would she do that? He thought it possible, and was prepared to take the risk. Meantime, he would follow her mother's advice and—"be kind—be gentle."

Then the door opened, and Agnes glided into the room. She was pale, but outwardly composed. Still beautiful; but her lips had lost their smile, and dark lines circled her eyes.

"It is indeed good of you to come, Miss Hardyng," said Percy, leading her to a chair, and seating himself near, but not too near. "Perhaps Mrs. Hardyng has told you that I desired so very much to see you?"

"She said that I should find you in the parlour," returned the girl impassively.

"Did she not suggest a reason for my visit?"

"She mentioned that you were here, and requested me to entertain you."

"Again permit me to say that it is indeed good of you to come. You have been so pale of late, Agnes—so evidently depressed—that I ventured to think my silence might have been the cause."

She neither affirmed nor denied the supposition.

"Nay, tell me, Agnes. Can I have caused you any pain? If so, let me assure you that it was most unwittingly."

"You may have done — I cannot tell. But any such pain is dead."

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Percy, and that most earnestly. The girl's drear beauty affected him at that moment more than it had done in its palmiest days. Certainly it was expressionless, but that did not deter him. Her smile would no doubt return in the course of time. What he most desired now was to call her his own; and truly she was a glorious prize to win.

"Then, dear, may I tell you why I came?"

"If you would be so good, Mr. Todd."

"To ask you to become my wife, Agnes."

"I presume that my mother is a consent-

ing party, Mr. Todd." And then, for the first and only time during the interview, a cynical smile quivered about the corners of her mouth.

"Can you doubt it, dear? Our happiness is hers."

Agnes put forth a hand which Percy clasped in both his own. It was far easier to do that than to compel her lips to formulate even a simple "yes."

"My darling!" he exclaimed. "This is indeed a priceless gift. Never shall I forget the hour in which it was bestowed."

She allowed the hand to remain passively in his; but it felt cold.

"And you care for me a little, dear?"

"I have given you my hand," she replied, with a bitterness that it was impossible to conceal.

"Ah, Agnes, if you only knew how deep my love!"

"I fully appreciate its extent and devo-

tion, Mr. Todd. We shall, no doubt, find my love to be as deep as your own."

"That can hardly be, dearest. I have worshipped you for months. I have grieved at every shadow which has fallen upon your face. I have rejoiced at every smile which has rendered it more beautiful than I can describe."

"Perhaps, Mr. Todd, now that we have arrived at a mutual understanding, you will permit me to retire? I should greatly prefer to be alone."

"From henceforth, dear, your wish must be my law. But are you really obliged to go so soon?"

She took no heed of the question, but rose from her chair.

"Possibly you might wish to see Mrs. Hardyng before you return home," she said.

He interpreted her words as a dismissal for the day, and understood that he was not expected to remain for lunch.

"How thoughtful of you!" he murmured; "but you are always thoughtful. If it will not give you too much trouble, will you ask her to see me for five minutes? I shall not detain her longer."

She bowed her head, and, sweeping past him as he opened the door, was lost in the deep shadows of the old hall.

When she had disappeared, Percy trod the faded carpet with agitated steps. He had won the day, and had triumphed over his rival. But with what a triumph? Now that he had obtained what he so much sought, his victory appeared tantamount to defeat. He had not succeeded in gaining her love. Nay. He knew that her love had been given to another, and would never be his. That she had read between the lines and gauged his motives; that she despised him, if she did not absolutely hate him; that she had accepted him for his wealth and not for himself. He felt humi-

liated and intensely irritated. A suspicion dawned upon his mind that not only had she bought him as he had bought her, but that she had bound him with an iron chain which would prove a burden, and which it would be impossible to cast aside. Throughout their late interview she had preserved her composure and kept him at arm's-length. He had been unable to pierce her armour or bend her to his will. Her acceptance of his offer had been spontaneous, nor had it been influenced in the slightest degree by anything that he had, or could have, urged. He felt that hers was the master-spirit, and that it would be his province to obey; that to her was the substantial triumph, and to him the moral slavery. And he ground his teeth in the bitterness of his wrath.

After all, had the game been worth the candle? Was it too late even now to withdraw from the enterprise; to explain

to Mrs. Hardyng that her daughter could not give the love he sought, but had lavished it on another? He would have been tempted to make the experiment had it not been for two opposing emotions which held him back. He hated Martin with a goodly hatred, and over him at least had been victorious. Then, he was at heart a coward. He was afraid of his father's sneers, of Mrs. Hardyng's indignation, of the gossiping tongues of Mrs. Grundy and Sir Jabesh Windbag. In former years he had been the scapegoat of his mother, licked and despised at school, and the boy had proved father to the man. He was no nobler, no bolder, now than then. He hated the straight and loved the crooked; he preferred the tortuous byway to the more direct road.

No. As he had made his bed, so must he lie. He knew

"no rules of charity,
Which renders good for bad, blessings for curses."

CHAPTER V.

TOO LATE.

And how came it that Agnes could discard Martin and accept Percy? All noble-minded women will no doubt be able to assign a reason without the mediation of a prompter. Their hearts will tell them better than any prompter can. They will know that she succumbed where she ought to have been strong; that she had crossed a line which none, least of all those of her own sex, can do unscathed; that she had lost her self-respect.

Poor girl! It might have contributed to her peace had Mrs. Hardyng been removed when she was yet a child, and although

her natural instincts had been allowed to blossom in wild luxuriousness. It might have been better had Blanche been her sole guide. It might have been better, for it could not have been worse. In such case, their two untainted souls, attracted each to each by the loss of an unknown mother, might have mingled their tears, have shared their joys, and trodden with twined arms their destined path—have trodden it in fresh innocence, careless of Mrs. Grundy and Sir Jabesh Windbag, of Ops, that most helpless of goddesses. But it was not to be. Mrs. Hardyng lived, and had administered to both alike deadening potions extracted from the recesses of her charmful medicine-bag.

On Blanche they had produced no ultimate effect. She had found an antidote in her father's manly character, in her love for Arthur, and in her own true heart. If she were not so pretty as her sister—so sylph-

like and laughter-loving—she was more staid and reliable, endowed with greater contentment and less ambition. Then came Arthur, whose keen perception of the beautiful, the good, the true, had permeated her life and dominated her thoughts. She had become alive to the fallacy of her mother's conceits, and these, so far as she was concerned, were thenceforth powerless. She was actuated by no feeling of unrest, for love had become her taskmaster. And when Arthur looked fondly into her face, he realized that he had found a meet helpmate —one whose chief beauty lay within, but whose purity was reflected in the eyes which met his own.

Agnes had lighted upon no such antidotes. Martin had been long absent, and, even had he been present, the love with which she regarded him was too greatly stained by vanity for it to be permanent or deep. She had never been attracted by her

sister's character, nor could she understand its drift. She had never made of her a friend or confidante. She considered her to be too prim, too over-scrupulous and over-religious, for that. And religion was not one of Agnes's strong points. When she was quite young, religion had shared its throne with the sit of her bonnet; when she reached what ought to have been "years of discretion," the sit of her bonnet had usurped seven-eighths of the throne. As the French have put it, with their usual perspicuity, "Taste comes by eating." And Agnes had tasted until the sit of her bonnet grew sweeter and yet more sweet, and religion more bitter and yet more bitter. Vanity came to undermine love, and Self to exclude aught more worthy. At last she saw "nothing in this world but the little history of her own pleasures and pains." Her heart contracted upon itself at the very time when that of her sister went forth

glowing with solicitude toward others. Certainly, she put in an appearance at church of a Sunday morning, but did so because such a proceeding was decent, and not from a conviction of its efficacy. According to her, the succeedant lunch and glass of sherry were far more invigorating than any precept which could be enunciated from the pulpit. Truth had ceased to be the one means to a great end. The first table of the Law had yielded to the second, and, in course of time, the second had become so narrowed as to relate but to the one idol established in her heart.

Such was her condition when Martin reappeared at Chudlegh, and poured into her ear the story of his love. As he did so, the remembrance of happier — far happier—times had stirred her breast. His earnestness, his worth, his much-tried affection, had touched a tender chord, and raised their testimony against her world-

liness. She had fled from his side, and, kneeling at the bed, had buried her throbbing brow in its soft quilt. At that moment she almost wished that she had not fallen. During that comparatively lucid interval she felt unclean, degraded. She sighed for heaven, but was drawn to earth. Wealth, position, luxury—all that these could give — had become too real. She had set up her idol, and could worship in no other shrine but that in which it stood. Martin had come too late.

It often happens that the motives which drive men towards the shoals and quicksands upon which they wreck their fortune are of a duplex character. Up to the moment of the final catastrophe they pretend to mistake false lights for true. They are piloted by self-will, assuring themselves the while that they are following in the wake of duty. "They exchange the love of truth for what they call the love of

truth." They cast morality to the winds, and steer by a compass of their own invention.

And so it was with Agnes. She felt that she could love Martin; nay, did love him, should ever love him. But it was with what she was pleased to call love, and not the very jewel. Her love took no thought of him—of his pain, of his disappointment, of his future. It was with self alone that she was concerned; it was self that she sought to assoil, and not another's trouble over which she yearned. She held fast to her "cities of the plain," and yet, like Percy, must find a justification wherewith to calm her soul. In her turn she took unto her idol false prophets, and prayed them, saying, "My masters, what must I do?" And they, evolving their treacherous oracle from out mephitic vapours, retorted, "Art thou worthy?"

The response was none other than she

expected; nay, had longed for. Nor, when it came, did it appear in the slightest degree enigmatical. She accepted it, maybe with a few lukewarm tears, as final. How could she be worthy—worthy a man so noble and tried as Martin—she, who had almost forgotten his existence, and had preferred Percy and Percy's wealth to a dinner of herbs with love for its only seasoning? She accepted then the fiat of her oracle. For a time she even revelled in her discernment and in her meretricious self-oblation. She regarded herself as Martin's saviour, as one who had rescued him from the living death which must have overtaken him had he been united to a woman so unworthy as herself. But the mistaken exaltation which possessed her could not be long-lived. A reaction must necessarily set in, and, when it did, she recognized how great her fall. Shocked beyond measure, and like her first parent, she hastened to

cloak the knowledge of good and evil which had found a lodgment in her breast by a superficial covering. She assumed that frigid mask which too often conceals an aching heart and springs from the consciousness of a void within. Her rippling laughter was heard no more. The bright, happy smile no longer played about her lips. The glad light of those sparkling eyes, which Martin had so much loved, was stilled for ever. A beauty—cold, sad, pitiful to see—had filled their place. Her best friends, with dried-up brain and "tears seven times salt," might well have cried—

> "O rose of May!
> Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!
> O heavens! is't possible, a young maid's wits
> Should be as mortal as an old man's life?"

When Mrs. Hardyng returned to Percy in Sir Christopher's old parlour, he was still pacing the carpet with quick steps; but, so soon as she appeared, he, having

been an actor on the world's great stage from boyhood, smoothed his ruffled brow and restrained his temper. And if the good mother did perceive any trace of his recent agitation, she kept such knowledge to herself, and advanced towards him with her most cordial smile.

"Percy, I am so delighted!" she exclaimed. "This will indeed be good news for Reginald. And so the dear girl has consented to our wishes?"

"She has promised me her hand," said Percy stiffly. For dear life, and actor though he was, he could not at the moment be effusive. Effusiveness might be possible to his so soon to be mother-in-law. She had been just assured of her younger daughter's future, whilst he—— But what did it profit to think about that now? The die had been cast, the Rubicon had been crossed, and, like one greater them himself, he must abide the issue.

"She is a dear girl," murmured the grateful mother. "She has crowned my happiness. I could almost lay down my life without a pang."

"Nay, dear Mrs. Hardyng. I trust that you may be spared for long years to come."

"And yet, why should I be spared, Percy? What more can woman desire than to die, knowing that her children's happiness is assured?"

"To live and see their happiness," suggested Percy, with as cynical an accent as he dared assume.

"You may be right," she said, resting a soft hand upon his arm, and descending once more to earth. "But you must make allowance for a mother's feelings, Percy." Then, after a pause, "You will remain for lunch, of course?"

"I doubt whether my doing so would be altogether acceptable to Agnes," he retorted sarcastically.

"Perhaps not, poor girl. She cannot fail to be upset. The excitement which she has undergone may have proved too much for nerves already overstrung."

Evidently Mrs. Hardyng had determined to keep up appearances, and Percy mocked in his heart at her unceasing platitudes. He knew, as well as she did, that her words were hollow, but was constrained to admit that she sustained her part with unexceptionable ability.

"Then let us say to-morrow," she continued.

"To-morrow be it," he returned. "By the bye, it might be as well not to allude in any way to our engagement until I have seen my father. I will do so this afternoon, and let you know the result in the morning."

"If you think it for the best, Percy. But it will be a hard task to conceal so great a happiness from Reginald."

"Believe me, I would not impose such

a task except upon sufficient grounds. The fact is, I should much prefer to break the news to Mr. Hardyng, fortified by my father's consent and blessing. By so doing, I shall save him all anxiety as to his daughter's future position. Not that we have much to fear on that score," he added, smiling. "My father, although in many ways careful of his money, can upon occasion be most liberal."

"Oh, Percy, I was not thinking about that! Those horrible settlements had never crossed my thoughts."

The young man pressed her hand gently, as though he were fully assured of her disinterestedness, and departed.

Once more alone, Mrs. Hardyng sunk into a chair with a sigh of intense relief. Her double campaign was well-nigh concluded, and victory was about to crown her efforts. She felt at peace with herself and with her world. She knew that she had

gained the approval of Mrs. Grundy and won the smiles of Sir Jabesh Windbag, and her maternal heart was lightened of a heavy burden. The rest she must leave to Providence; but, whatever the future might bring forth, she could at least go to church on the following Sunday sensible of having done her duty. To her the coming Christmas must needs be a happy one. Its advent would be heralded by the gratulations of many friends, by golden visions, by the presence of two prospective sons-in-law whose great expectations were a matter of county gossip. As for Agnes, her smile would soon return; she would soon realize her own importance, and bless the mother who had brought her so carefully to "a lordly pleasure-house, wherein at ease for aye to dwell"—

> "O Soul, make merry and carouse,
> Dear soul, for all is well."

So pleasant were the good mother's

dreams that the announcement of lunch seized her with astonishment. Then presently Blanche and Arthur returned from their long stroll and joined her in the dining-room, their faces aglow with health and love and hope.

"What have you done with Agnes, mamma?" asked Blanche.

"I think that she is in her own room, love. No! Here she comes at last. You are late, my dear," she added, turning to her younger daughter, and prepared to give her any support that might be required.

But the girl's now habitual mask stood her in good stead. It concealed whatever discord might rule within.

Mrs. Hardyng felt reassured. "And what do you propose for this afternoon, Arthur?" she inquired, eager to divert his attention from Agnes.

"We were thinking of a drive—that is, if you do not want the pony-carriage.

There are several outlying cottages which I ought to visit."

"Take it, by all means. I am glad to find that Blanche cannot deter you from duty."

Arthur looked at his betrothed affectionately. "Far from that," he said. "On the contrary, she is the good genius who animates my drooping spirit."

"And who has roused what in your nature is poetical," added the good mother, with affected gaiety. "What a lesson for you, Agnes! You must endeavour to profit by so happy an example," saying which, she shot a swift glance at the girl, to see if her words had produced any effect.

But the mask continued impenetrable.

"You need have no fear as to that," cried Arthur, laughing. "When her turn comes, Agnes will no doubt do likewise." From which it may be inferred that the young fellow was no great character-reader;

or that, if he were, love had obscured his better judgment.

"Will you come with us, Agnes?" inquired Blanche.

"Not to-day, dear; I should be in your way. Besides, I have a slight headache."

"Moreover, Aggie," suggested Arthur, "I should not be surprised were you to have a visitor this afternoon. At least, I heard something to that effect last night."

"A visitor!" exclaimed the good mother. "And to Agnes!"

"I heard Mr. Hardyng remind my brother not to forget to-morrow afternoon —this afternoon, he meant, and, from the look on Martin's face, I inferred that he intends to come."

Mrs. Hardyng almost jumped in her chair. If her husband had but told her that, if Percy had not happened to drop in that morning, how different might have been the issue of her campaign.

She silently thanked her magic star—her Prospero; but feared to look at Agnes. Had she done so, she would have noticed one quick, sharp spasm to have crossed the pale face.

So soon, thought the poor girl—so soon! And yet it must come. Better, perhaps, that it should come at once. Then she forced herself to say—

"If he calls, I shall be glad to see him, Arthur."

A chill fell upon the party. The words were commonplace enough, but their tone was sad—so sad. It seemed to be infused with a smothered wail, to be the echo of a dead past, to be tinged with the despairing accents of a pent-up spirit. Even Mrs. Hardyng shuddered at its hopeless despondency.

Ah, Mrs. Grundy and Sir Jabesh Windbag! Ah, perverted, inverted Telescope! O Ops, most *inops!* Answerable are ye

for many an unhappy heart, and for vows most foully broken.

The conversation first languished, and then was restricted to short questions and monosyllabic replies. Both Blanche and Arthur felt that something was wrong; but what it might be they could not guess. It was a relief to both when Agnes rose from the table.

"Mamma," she said, "I am going into the garden. If Martin comes, please let him know that he will find me there."

"Dear child!" murmured Mrs. Hardyng, when Agnes had closed the door. "Her nerves seem to be quite unstrung—don't you think so, Arthur?"

"She wants a thorough change," he returned anxiously. "Could we not manage to take her to the sea, and give her a dose of stiff salt breezes? They would do more to cure her than all the prescriptions that were ever penned."

"It may be better to wait for a week or so, Arthur. And then, if she does not improve, I will speak on the subject to her father. Would you kindly ring the bell?" she continued. "I must order something to be kept warm against Mr. Hardyng's return."

The order given, she resought Sir Christopher's old parlour, and a quarter of an hour afterwards, Arthur, with Blanche at his side, was driving rapidly towards the lodge.

Mrs. Hardyng was left once more to her reflections. How fortunate it was that Arthur had prepared her for his brother's intended visit. It would be impossible to leave the house until he had come and gone. Agnes might want her support, and, from what she knew now, it would never do to leave Mr. Hardyng and Martin to work their will. The two combined might act upon the girl's feelings and destroy the effect which she had so greatly laboured to

produce. On the other hand, were Agnes left to herself, she had no fear of the engagement with Percy coming to an untimely end. The child was too proud to forswear herself. Her word once pledged, she would not be induced to take it back unless under the influence of great external pressure. If Martin were to come, he should see Agnes, but—he should see her alone. In that case she felt no doubt as to the result. Would, indeed, that he were here now, and that he could be closeted with the girl before Mr. Hardyng's return. Would that he might receive his dismissal before the latter could interfere. And, as the great desirability of such a consummation dawned upon her mind, she became restless and absolutely nervous. One moment, she raised her eyes to the clock, and dreaded to find the minute-hand already pointing to the hour when her husband might be expected; the next, she went to the window, and gazed down the

long, straight drive—eagerly watching for the gates to swing open, and for Martin to pass through. At last, and when least expected, the hall-bell rang, and the servant, throwing open the door, announced—

"Mr. Ffrench!"

Completely thrown off her guard by the suddenness of his appearance, she exclaimed, "You, Martin! How did you come? I did not see you riding up the drive."

"I came across the fields," he explained; adding, almost in the same breath, "Then you were expecting me, Mrs. Hardyng?"

"The fact is," she stammered, "Arthur led me to understand that you might call during the afternoon."

"Arthur?"

"Yes. He heard something to that effect from Mr. Hardyng. But, in any case, I am glad that you are here," she continued, and for once her words were sincere.

Martin saw that she was really glad,

and his heart throbbed with expectation. Possibly Mr. Hardyng had told her of his love, and had converted her into a friend.

"And Agnes. Is she at home?" he inquired with faltering accents.

"I believe so—yes, I am sure of it. She went into the garden directly after lunch."

"Might I see her? Might I speak with her for a few minutes?" he demanded eagerly.

"Certainly, my dear Martin, if you wish it. You are sure to find her somewhere about the place—probably near the willows. But I have no occasion to tell *you* where to look," she added, with a smile, for the good mother had by this time regained her usual *verve*.

"You will not think me rude, if I run away?"

"Not at all. Go, by all means, if you want to have a gossip—one of your old gossips—with Agnes."

In an instant he had flown from the room, and Mrs. Hardyng was again alone. After all, nothing could have turned out better. The battle was almost won; and, even were Mr. Hardyng to return that very minute, she could detain him at the luncheon-table, and report that Martin and Agnes were together in the garden. Nothing could be more satisfactory.

Martin hurried through the porch, and made rapidly for the willows. His heart had been stirred by the kindly reception which he had met with in the parlour, and a glowing hope had fired his spirit. He soon descried the girl's figure at the far end of a long, straight walk. "At last, at last!" he cried joyfully. "Yet how sad she looks! Perhaps I have left her alone too long."

As Agnes turned to retrace her steps, she saw who it was that came hurrying so fast to meet her. A deep-drawn sigh escaped

her lips, and her frame quivered as do the sere autumnal leaves when shaken by the wind. "That I might be spared this," she murmured. "Oh, that I might have been spared this!" But Martin was nearing her with rapid strides, and she must resume her frigid mask.

"At last, dear Agnes!" he exclaimed, seizing her passive hand. "Mrs. Hardyng told me that I should find you here."

"Mamma told you?"

"Yes, dearest. And she welcomed me so kindly. Do you know, Aggie, I think your father must have spoken to her, and that she has consented at last to accept me for a son-in-law."

"My father told her of your love?"

"Yes, Aggie. I spoke to him about it yesterday. He said that I had nothing to fear from him, and that, if I could but get you to say 'yes,' I had nothing to fear from anybody."

Oh, what, in her great folly, had she thrown away? What a true heart was this that she had so despised!

"And now, Aggie," he continued, in his impetuosity, regardless of her agitation, "there is nothing to prevent our union. It entirely rests with you now, darling. You have but to say 'yes'—that one, short word 'yes'—and all will come right. How its little hand trembles!" he exclaimed, raising it to his lips and covering it with kisses. "Poor, frightened, loving fawn!"

It was the hand which Percy had kissed that morning, which belonged to Percy, and could never belong to Martin. She snatched it from his grasp, and buried it beneath the folds of her cloak.

"Aggie!" he exclaimed. "How could you do that? But how pale you are, darling!" he cried, staggered by the hard, set look which had seized her face. "Do

you feel ill? Or what can I have done to vex you? Let me take you to a seat, dearest."

"I would rather walk," she said coldly. And for some minutes they followed the path without a word being spoken.

"Before you left me the other day," began Martin, at last, "you said that I was 'dear' to you, and called upon Heaven to bless me. How I thanked you for the words! They told me that I had not been forgotten. They inspired me with hope. They caused my heart to yearn towards you with even greater intensity than I had thought possible. But you left me suddenly, and I felt that I had been too precipitate; that I had startled you, frightened you from my side. And yet, dear, I hugged those words to my breast, and have cherished them ever since."

The girl remained silent. Even now, it was a bitter-sweet to realize that she was so

deeply loved. She clung to these last fragments of his respect as does a drowning man to the tumbling, naked spar. She shrunk from the self-conviction that was at hand, and rejoiced in a respite, however short.

"And now, darling, I have come once more. Your father has given his consent. It rests with you to crown the work which you have begun."

She bowed her head in shame—bowed that head which might have been her glory, which had confronted Percy so boldly, in very shame. The long-pent tears—tears of remorse rather than of repentance—rolled down her cheeks. Her hands grasped each other painfully.

"Too late—too late!" she murmured.

"Too late, my darling?"

"I am engaged," she whispered, in so low a tone as to be scarcely audible.

Even then, Martin could not realize the

truth. "Impossible!" he cried, aghast. "Your father knew nothing about it yesterday. You must be dreaming, Aggie."

"It is no dream," she said faintly.

"Engaged!" he repeated, the blood surging to his brow. "Engaged! When? To whom? Speak, in the name of Heaven!"

"This morning; to—to Percy Todd."

"Never!" he almost shouted. "I cannot believe it. I will not believe it. What? to that cur, to that liar, to that coward."

Martin's violence did more to restore the girl's calm than could have done his tears or supplications. She could meet him on another ground now. She had to defend the character of her betrothed, and not her own.

"Remember to whom you are speaking," she returned coldly.

"Not to that fellow's future wife," he retorted. "By heavens, no! It cannot be. It shall not be."

"To Percy Todd's future wife," she said defiantly.

"It cannot be, Aggie," he went on more quietly, love prevailing over passion. "How can you be engaged to him when you know how deeply I love you, and when you return—aye, when you return my love? For, as there is a God above us, I know that your love is mine."

"I do love you—shall always love you."

"Bless you for those words, Aggie!" and he attempted to seize her hand.

She drew back swiftly, and foiled his purpose. She loved him, or at least thought that she did; but then—she was not worthy. Her false prophets had suggested it to be so, and she had accepted her unworthiness as being indisputable. Nor had an idea once crossed her mind that she could be other than she was. She had found no place for repentance, possibly

because she had not sought it with tears. But, one thing she had found—the necessity for a spurious self-sacrifice, which would permit her to pose as a martyr whilst it opened a way for the indulgence of her will. She had fallen, no doubt, but her fall must not imperil her loved one's future. Rather than it should do that, she would magnify her misdeed, and, by vilifying herself, excite Martin's contempt. He must be made to feel that she could never be his; he must appreciate the impassableness of the gulf which parted them; he must be brought thoroughly to despise her, or he would not seek to refresh his wounded heart by taking to it another love. To make him feel her unworthiness was the penance which had been allotted to her—the one method by which, with any plausibility, she could condone the promise given to Percy.

"I love you," she said in her coldest tone, "but my hand can never be yours."

"You love me, Aggie, and yet refuse your hand?"

"Exactly," she cried, with a bitter laugh. "It has been sold."

"Sold?"

"Bartered for wealth, for jewels, for lands, for rich dresses, and the pomp of life."

"Aggie, Aggie!" he groaned; "what devil has possessed you?"

"I know not, and care not," she exclaimed in her excitement. "I was not born to be a poor man's wife."

The worst was over now. She had indeed made the gulf impassable, and for a moment she gloried in her self-negation.

Martin's eyes flashed with a righteous anger. "And have you been playing with me these many years?" he exclaimed. "Have you been deluding me with false smiles, leaving me to bask in the sunshine of a hollow love, using me as a toy that

could be thrown down at pleasure, blasting my life, and poisoning your own?"

He was terrible in his indignation. Its reality far exceeded her expectations, and, in her wretchedness, she trembled violently.

"No, not that, Martin," she interrupted; "not that!"

"Aye, but it is so. You have embittered both our lives, and perhaps—for ever."

She sank upon the ground at his feet. "Have pity, Martin," she pleaded. "Have pity! Give me time, that I may tell you how it came about."

"You have said more than enough," he replied sternly. "Away! Kneel not to me, but, if you can, at the feet of One who alone is able to forgive."

"Martin—Martin!"

He hearkened not. With bent head he turned from where she stooped so low, leaving her side and—for ever.

"Martin, dear Martin! Come back," she wailed. "My love, come back!"

Too late. Alas, too late. She could not have followed him had she dared to do so. Her brain grew dizzy; a numbness seized her limbs. She sunk yet lower on the path, whilst a merciful unconsciousness for a time assuaged her pain.

CHAPTER VI.

DISENCHANTMENT.

Do the motives which had prevailed with Agnes and overpowered her love appear insufficient, overstrained, or even impossible? It may be so. But not on that account are they the less real. It is as much the duty of one who assumes the pen of fiction to lay bare the heart, to expose its weaknesses, and exhibit its hidden sores, as to speak softly and make that to appear wholesome which is tainted with corruption.

Each soul possesses a dual character—its better aspirations leading it to something better, nobler than itself; its lower tending to degrade it beneath the level of the beasts

which perish. The natural which is in man, notwithstanding all that philosophers may urge against the fact, is of the earth earthy. It is incapable of rising beyond mediocrity, and is prone to cast its victim into the nethermost pit. Revelation is essential to its well-being. That discarded, to what lengths may it not go? That disallowed, to whom but Self is it willing to submit? Nay, Self becomes its one most mournful god, and superstition its one ally. Even the best of materialists have attained to nothing beyond this—"Whence—what—whither?" Blinded immortals. If they can evolve and teach no more than that, may they find mercy in the times which shall be.

And Agnes had become as these, nor possessed a better guide than they. No wonder, then, that she fell. No wonder that she preferred the tangible in life, having no faith in things unseen.

But it would be useless to follow her from the gravelled path on which she crouched. Most people have known remorse, even should they not have found repentance. Most people have been wounded by its thorns and tasted its unsatisfying fruit. They will know that she had bartered happiness for pelf, yet found not peace; that she had basked in her gilded temple until her soul was callous. No need to enter that temple and inhale the mephitic vapours springing from the well of its Cassotis. The actual in life is far too present—its often barrenness too patent to the eye.

But with Martin it was otherwise. He was the victim which she had slain, the sacrifice which she had offered to her idol. When he left her side, he had staggered rather than walked. He was dazed by a blow so sudden; overwhelmed by a dull and not-to-be-resisted misery. He could grasp

but one idea—namely, that he had lost his love; lost it, too, after a fashion which he scarcely dared to contemplate. Had Percy been worthy, had the man whom Agnes had preferred to himself been true and noble, had she retained her self-respect, it would have been different. In that case, he might have grieved for himself, but could have prayed that she might be happy. After a time, he might have been content to regard her as a sister, and to caress her children as they hung about his knee. Now that was impossible. The image which he had imagined had fallen low; the ideal which he had cherished had been unseated. In the first bitterness of his disappointment he could but cry with old Serapion, "You have deprived me of my God!"

No. Chudlegh could be his home no longer. He could not endure the thought of seeing Agnes again, least of all as Percy's wife. At first, even the happiness of

Blanche and Arthur would be unendurable. It would remind him too forcibly of what he had lost. Every stick and stone about the place would speak of a hope which had passed away, of times when he had dreamed of the days to come, of her who had rejected him in the very hour that he had trusted to call her wife. The familiar faces that he had known from childhood would add their quota to the story, and remind him of his wretchedness. At Chudlegh he should be surrounded by phantoms of the past, and his life would become a burden. For a time he must avoid the place. It would be but one more wrench, one more tug at those heart-strings which had been already so greatly torn. And yet he groaned at the mere idea. He was by nature warm-hearted and affectionate. This home of his had formed the one oasis of his life, the beacon which had cheered his drooping spirit in many an hour of midnight darkness, the

spring at which he had quenched his thirst, where dwelt the mother who had steadied his baby feet and strengthened him by her counsel.

Ah yes, that mother. Reeling as he was under the blow which had been dealt, he could not forget her care. He remembered her now, as he had always done, with grateful fondness. For her sake he must remain at Chudlegh until after Christmas. Her happiness must not be rendered less complete by any wilful, overt act of his. "Dear mother," he whispered, whilst his heart went out towards her with a yearning tenderness. How grieved she would be at his disappointment; how willingly she would have died, if only she might restore intact the treasure of which he stood bereft! Then he remembered with what patience she had borne his childish tempers and heedless ways; how she had taught him to act honourably, to

feel charitably, and to believe in the existence of One who rules not only in heaven, but upon earth. Never had he seemed to love her so dearly as in this sad hour. Oh, could Agnes have been like her, or as Blanche, or even so pure as Dorothy, how much more brightly the future would have loomed!

Arrived at the Hall, Martin hurried to his room. He was in no mood to face his father, or, just then, even his mother. He would have preferred to be alone all the evening, and to have brooded over his grief in secret. But that was impossible. When seven o'clock came, he must join his parents at the dinner-table and assume what indifference he could. He scorned to feign an indisposition which he did not feel. He would meet his trouble boldly, and strangle it, if perchance it might be strangled. He must do so sooner or later, and it was better to begin at once.

Yet, notwithstanding a determination to the contrary, his attempted self-control proved tantamount to failure. When he took his seat, his eyes might be tearless, but were lighted by the fire which preyed within. His lips were colourless and dry. Do what he could, he was but the shadow of what he had been the night before. His father rallied him in vain; whilst Mrs. Ffrench, putting this and that together, presaged the truth of what had happened.

At last, the squire, having discussed the two glasses of port which constituted his after-dinner allowance, rejoined his wife in the drawing-room, and Martin, slipping away unnoticed, returned wearily to his room. His head really ached now, and he longed to rest it on a pillow. Dressed as he was, he threw himself upon the bed, but neither sleep nor tears came to the relief of his overweighted nerves. Would this pain, he wondered, endure for ever?

Even would it endure that livelong night? Oh! that Christmas were come and gone, and that he were back in Camptown, where he might hope to expel it by sheer hard work. He had an indistinct idea that the Globe-trotter would be his best companion; that at his hands he would find sympathy without being compelled to bare his wound. The Globe-trotter was accustomed to all sorts and conditions of men. If in his chequered life he had picked up a certain amount of cynical aggressiveness, he had also contracted certain world-wide, comprehensive sympathies, such as had not come within Martin's ken before. It must be, thought the young fellow, from his having lived under the open sky with men who were glad of each other's society, and apart from the greater selfishness which is inherent to more crowded centres. Then he wondered whether it would have been better for Aggie had she been a colonist,

and whether, if she had lived in the Globe-trotter's Waimate County, she would have cared for his love more than for Percy's wealth.

"But it is too late to think of that," he murmured sorrowfully. "Oh, Aggie—Aggie!" he continued, tossing restlessly on the bed, "how could you be so cruel?"

Then came a knock at the door, and he knew that his mother stood without.

"May I come in, Martin?" she inquired gently.

"Yes, mother."

Mrs. Ffrench closed the door softly, and advanced towards the bed.

"Don't move, dear," she said, placing a chair beside the pillow, and taking his hand. "Is there no hope," she whispered,—"none at all?"

"None, mother."

They remained with hand locked in hand, though neither spoke. She knew

that a still sympathy would do more good than any words. He must be the first to unburden his overburdened mind. After that, she might strike the pent rock, and perhaps the healing stream would flow.

"Mother," he said at length, "I dare not tell you all. But she was cruel—very cruel."

Mrs. Ffrench clasped his hand more tightly. His words made her sure that in this, the greatest sorrow of his life, he would confide in her as he had done in every minor trial.

"She is engaged, mother. She is going to marry Percy Todd. And, oh, mother, if he had only been more worthy. Even now, if only she loved him——"

"Surely, dear, she must love him."

A shudder overran Martin's frame; and then, covering his burning eyeballs with the hand that was still at liberty, he lay without movement. What had he been

about to say? No. He could not so degrade his whilom love as to repeat her very words, even to his mother. He must be faithful, if she were false. His manhood revolted against a retaliation so unworthy.

But Mrs. Ffrench understood the full measure of that suffering to which her boy had been exposed.

"Poor Martin," she murmured softly. "I can conceive the rest without giving you the pain of telling it."

"Not quite *all* the rest, mother," he said wearily.

"Perhaps not all, dear."

Already his mother's presence had found an echo in Martin's heart. He had passed that dumb state of misery when pain is locked in the silent breast and none can be found to share its heavy load; when it seems to crush the heart as in a vice; when it is at its worst, and deadens all other

thoughts. A trouble once shared is half assuaged. Then the acme of its bitterness is past, and, although still bitter, it can be borne with fortitude. Martin scarce knew why or wherefore; but the touch of his mother's hand, and to feel that she participated in his sorrow, brought relief.

"I knew, darling, that you would greatly suffer, were my fears to come true."

"Then you had fears, mother?"

"Yes. I had remarked Percy's frequent visits to the Chase, and noticed the encouragement which he received from Mrs. Hardyng."

"But her father knew nothing about it," cried Martin eagerly. "Only two days ago he said that I had nothing to fear if I could but get Agnes to say 'yes.' And that makes the disappointment so much harder, mother. I was buoyed up by certainty to the very last." And, as he spoke, his lips quivered, and his young face

was contorted by an emotion which must surely leave some traces in its wake.

"Suffering with disappointment, Martin, is a baptism to which all must submit. It is through agony—deep, soul-apprehended agony—that we are brought to a knowledge of the True. It is suffering which leads on to patience, and conduces to submission, which, when its first bitterness is spent, elevates our life and leaves it purer than before."

"But it is hard, mother—so hard to relinquish what has been a life-long hope, what has been a loadstar."

"And which for those same reasons, dear, may have become too precious."

Martin again lay quiet upon the bed; but the words had failed to bring their comfort. The blow had overtaken him too recently for submission to come thus early.

"And remember, 'God does not keep

a good man in prosperity; He tries, He strengthens him; He prepares him for Himself.' And, darling, 'Thou too shalt return *home* in honour—to thy far-distant home, in honour; doubt it not—if in the battle thou keep thy shield.'"

Yes. That was the true, the only consolation; but in that hour it presented to Martin naught save a blank and dreary future. Another paroxysm of despair seized him, one so violent that even his mother's presence became unendurable. She realized that he must wrestle with his grief alone. She could do no more. She could only trust to the soothing effects of time.

She pressed one long kiss upon his feverish brow, and rose from her chair.

"Martin," she said gently, "you will not leave Chudlegh until after Christmas?"

"No, mother. And, mother dear, please tell father what has happened. And—and

ask him not to speak to me about it. I could not bear that—just yet."

In the small hours of the night, sleep came to the weary, suffering fellow, nor did he wake until the late-rising sun was streaming through the casement. A subdued, frosty-looking sun it was, harmonizing with his thoughts. On first awaking he had forgotten the incidents of yesterday. He but felt that some great, unknown calamity was hovering beside his pillow. Suddenly he remembered all, and a sharp spasm crossed his face. He went to the glass, and started back. Could the thing which he saw reflected be really the likeness of himself? If so, how changed he was since yesterday! The eyes were sunk and lustreless; the lips were pale; the colour had faded from his cheek; even deep lines were there, about the corners of the mouth. And then he thought of the hand by which he had been stricken.

"Oh, Aggie — Aggie!" he exclaimed. "Could you but see me now, you might indeed repent."

But he strove to forget the past. He would employ the days between then and Christmas by taking leave of the home that could be his no longer. To do so might be painful, but he knew that in the aftertime it would bring a consolation.

The mere thought that he had found an occupation stimulated his nerves and brought with it a greater composure. The meeting at the breakfast-table proved less irksome than he expected. Both his father and mother were in his confidence, and knew something of what he suffered. He had not to fear their questions, nor was there a necessity to conceal his feelings. And this in itself was a great relief.

After breakfast, he started for the lime-kiln, but had gone a very short way down the drive when he saw Arthur galloping

towards the Hall. He was hesitating whether to await his arrival or to gain the solitude of the wood, when the difficulty was set at rest by his brother pulling up at his side.

"Dear, dear old fellow," exclaimed the latter, springing to the ground, and placing a hand on Martin's shoulder; "I am so sorry. And so is Blanche. She sent me this morning to see how you were getting on."

Such open-hearted sympathy caused a moisture to gather in Martin's eyes—the first moisture which had risen to them since his interview with Agnes.

"And Mr. Hardyng is so grieved. He has scarcely spoken a word since yesterday."

"How did he find it out, Arthur?"

"The poor child told him herself. It appears that Mrs. Hardyng had mentioned that you were both in the garden, and, when it was almost dark, and you did not

return, he went to seek you. He found Agnes alone, half-dead with cold, lying upon a garden-bench. What passed between them we do not know; but he brought her, in an almost fainting condition, to the house.

"He knew nothing of what had been going on?" exclaimed Martin bitterly.

"Nothing. I am sure of that. Neither did Blanche."

"I cannot go to the Chase again, Arthur; but will you give my love to Blanche and thank Mr. Hardyng for his kindness. And —and will you tell Aggie that I forgive her."

Arthur promised that the messages should be delivered.

"Don't tell Aggie what I look like. She will suffer enough without that."

The elder brother gazed into the worn face, and was startled by the ravages which had been inflicted in a single night.

"Not tell her!" he exclaimed bitterly. "Not tell her! She ought to know. It might do her good. She is not worthy to black your boots, Martin. She——"

"Arthur!" interposed Martin, in a tone which brought the other to a dead stop.

"I speak but the truth, old boy. And Mr. Hardyng thinks as I do—he told me as much this morning."

"Let the past be buried," returned the other sadly. "If we cannot justify, we have no right to condemn."

His brother regarded him affectionately. "Just what I should have expected," he muttered to himself. "True as steel—worth his weight in gold. Gold! No gold could counterbalance what that foolish girl has thrown away."

"You must not be disappointed, Arthur, if I do not return to Chudlegh for your wedding. I expect that Mrs. Hardyng will wish Agnes to be married on the same

day, and—I could not stand that, you know. In any case, she will be there, which to me would be almost as bad. I shall stay with the mother until after Christmas, and then—then Camptown must be my home."

"Poor Martin! But no doubt you are right."

"No doubt about it. And yet, please, do not mention it. Let it come upon the mother by degrees."

He broke away, and plunged into the wood. He hurried up the steep, winding path without turning to look back or pausing to regain his breath—up, without a break, until he reached the lime-kiln, and had cast himself down among the dry, thick bracken. The conversation with his brother had been a great relief. He had entrusted him with the message that he had so much wished to send. He had done what he could to retrieve the hot

words with which he had overwhelmed Agnes the day before. He had sent his forgiveness, and his mind was easier.

Buried in the brown, crisp bracken, he marked not the passing hours. They seemed to bear no message on their wing, to goad him to no exertion. "Oh, Aggie —Aggie!" was the burden of his song; a shipwrecked love the mainspring of his thought. Stretched on the sloping bank, and pillowed on the bracken, he felt no damp; the rays of a wintry sun, both falling direct from heaven and refracted from the walls of the old kiln, kept at bay the cold. He was sensible of nothing save the weight of his despair. "Oh, Aggie—Aggie!" he murmured, and, whilst yet whispering that still-loved name, he lapsed into semi-consciousness.

Presently, half-dreaming, yet half-awake, he fancied that his mother stood beside him; that she regarded him with tender,

pitying eyes; that she bent down to kiss his fevered brow; that, kneeling on the bracken, she sought to lull his pain by singing him to sleep. Dear mother. She knelt just as she had been wont to kneel by his little cot, long years ago, and the words that he thought she sung were familiar to his ear—

"Look up, ye drooping hearts, to-day!
The King is very near.
Oh, cast your griefs and fears away,
For lo! your Help is here.

* * * * *

"Look up, ye souls weigh'd down with care!
The Sovereign is not far.
Look up, faint hearts, from your despair,
Behold the Morning Star!"

Then her figure grew dim, until altogether lost in the thick underwood. Yet, even so, he heard the words—each second becoming fainter and yet more faint—

"Look up, faint hearts, from your despair,
Behold the Morning Star!"

He awoke with a start, and his tears

flowed apace. At last the torrent was unpent, and its surging waters were irresistible. When they had expended their fury, deep scars might be left in their track, but the ground which they had flooded would be rendered more fruitful.

He rose from the bracken calmer than before, and began to descend the hill. As he neared the Hall, he found that it was after one. He felt no appetite for lunch, and, striking down the drive, wandered in the direction of the old church. Having reached the flat, he avoided both turnpike-road and village street by taking a seldom-frequented path which wended through the fields, and which, running along the foot of the hills and skirting the churchyard wall, would take him unnoticed to the very lich-gate.

He passed through this, and made for an old yew-tree which, spreading wide its arms, hung over and half concealed the

ancient chapel of La Vacherie. He sat down upon a square, brick-built tomb covered by a moss-grown stone, which for years had been a favourite resort of the village gossips on a Sunday morning. These, aided by wintry storms and the constant drip which fell from the overhanging yew, had defaced all trace of its once inscription.

Martin passed a glance over the many mementos of the past which circled him about, and thought how much quieter and possibly happier their occupants than himself. Strange memories did the old churchyard awaken. Many a forgotten form presented itself vividly to his mind as he sat and pondered. Forms which had descended to the grave in a ripe old age, forms which had been cut off in the first vigour of youth, mothers who lived again in their daughters, fathers whose remitted functions were continued by their sons.

But he had not entered the seldom-frequented path unnoticed. As he did so, a child in bright red cloak and wide-brimmed straw hat was advancing along the turnpike-road. She had shouted to him in vain, and so had followed him as fast as her tired little feet would allow. Peeping through the lich-gate, she had espied him seated on the tombstone, and now, standing by his side, was endeavouring to attract his attention by a succession of bobbing curtsies.

At last he looked up, and a spasm shot athwart his face. He recognized her but too well. She was daughter to the lodge-keeper at the Chase, to whom he had often thrown a copper as she opened the gate for him to pass through.

"Bessie!" he exclaimed. "Were you looking for me?"

"Yes, sir—please, sir," returned the child, with a double curtsy. "Miss Agnes gave

me this here bit o' paper, and said as I wur to give it to no one else."

Martin took it mechanically, and, as he did so, his mouth twitched nervously and the paper trembled in his grasp. What new trouble was this? What new torture was about to rack his soul?

"Please, sir; I can't tell what can have com'd upon Miss Agnes, for sure. She lookt awesome when she gi'ed me yon, an' said as how I wur to run wi' it as fast as I could git along."

The child's words decided Martin. However painful it might be to himself, he would not keep Agnes in suspense a moment longer than could be avoided, and, turning his back to the little messenger, he unfolded the paper. It contained three words: —

"Forgive me, Martin."

Impulsively he took a pencil from his pocket, and wrote below the sad appeal—

"I do forgive you, Aggie."

"Run, run, little one," he said, refolding the paper, and placing it, with a sixpence, in Bessie's palm. "Take that to Miss Agnes, and give it to her yourself. Quick, quick! for the poor young lady is in trouble."

Perhaps it was well for Martin that he could not be present when Agnes received his reply. He might have been tempted to mistake remorse for penitence, and to renew his offer of the previous day. She was in her room when Bessie arrived with the by that time crumpled, warm, and dirty paper. She snatched it eagerly from the girl's outstretched hand, and tore it open.

"Thank God! oh, thank God!" she exclaimed, pressing it to her lips. Then, flying to her father's study, she sank on her knees beside his chair.

"See, father," she cried, panting and excited. "See! He has forgiven me. If he can forgive—oh, so must you."

Mr. Hardyng looked down upon her sadly, and then laid one of his hands upon her fair head.

"I do forgive you, child, as, when my turn comes, I hope to be forgiven."

For years, Agnes treasured that paper as sacred. She placed it in a locket, and carried it next her heart. She regarded it as the passport by which she might find mercy, as a condonation of the past, and, in some sort, a justification of the future. Ah, well! Even in the worst of characters exists a something which, at intervals more or less remote, attempts to breathe the word "excelsior;" but which, too much inspired by self, forgets the wish almost as soon as uttered. For, alas! the prisoner cannot of himself illuminate his prison-house—that must be done by the pure, bright sun which shines from its throne in heaven.

At length came Christmas Day—the last day which Martin was to spend at

Chudlegh. He had visited Timon and Juno in their kennels, and had taken a long farewell of Linn. He had wandered about the fields, scaled the steep hills, and gazed upon the well-known plain. He had scoured the country lanes on "Betty Patch," and bid adieu to many a well-remembered landmark. He was glad that his departure was no longer to be deferred. He panted to be up and doing—to keep his trouble at bay by sheer hard work.

And yet, much as he desired to leave the place, he felt downcast and sad that Christmas morn. His eye wandered over the familiar faces in the crowded church. He could see Agnes sitting with bent head in her distant chapel, nestling closely to her father's side. He noted how careworn Mr. Hardyng looked, and knew that he, too, felt deeply his daughter's conduct. His own great loss stood vividly confronting him; so, too, did the great gulf which lay

between the present and the past. He held himself to be an alien; a pilgrim on the eve of a long and dreary pilgrimage; as homeless where he should have found a home. Ah, how would it all end? Would that he could see a termination to his pain.

"Say, ye holy Shepherds, say,
What your joyful news to-day;
Wherefore have you left your sheep
On the lonely mountain steep?"

How meaningless the words sounded to his ear! With what bitter mockery did they address his storm-tossed soul! They might bring peace and hope to others, but what could they do for him? His peace had taken wings; his hope had fled. And yet—and yet—

"Teach, O teach us, Holy Child,
By thy face, so meek and mild,
Teach us to resemble thee
In thy sweet humility."

A mist gathered in his eyes. The present faded into the past. Once more his

mother stood beside his little cot. Once more, lulling him to sleep, she murmured her sweet-voiced song. Mother — dear mother.

> "O star of wonder, star of night,
> Star with royal beauty bright,
> Westward leading, still proceeding,
> Guide us to thy perfect light."

Martin bowed his head, and the mist which had dimmed his eyes resolved itself into two large, comfort-laden tears.

PART IV.

CHAPTER I.

DOROTHY'S TROUBLE.

It was April weather. The dank of winter had fled; the trees were tinted by their swelling buds; the lawns exhibited traces of young verdure; the borders were gay with primrose, hyacinth, and tulip; a balmy air was gladdening nature into life. And yet, despite the instant spring, despite the sunshine which streamed so cheerfully through her boudoir window, Dorothy felt out of tune.

She was occupied with a piece of Berlin wool-work; for be it remembered that so long ago the æsthetic sunflower, the conventional lily, and mediæval purism of

to-day were not fashionable. The world was content to adorn its sofas with rococo cushions and brilliant antimacassars; to rest its feet on footstools whose distinguishing badge was a twined wreath of white roses and scarlet poppies set in a pea-green sea. But, whether she had been engaged upon the conventional lily of to-day or the brilliant antimacassar of the period, it would have been all one to Dorothy. Taste is mutable; but the mainsprings of the heart are changeless. In either case, her wools or silk would have become tangled and her needle have entered the canvas or diaper at the wrong spot. In either case, she must have pricked her finger, and discovered, had she been inclined to do so, that her temper was disturbed.

Dorothy was in love, although she did not admit, even to herself, the possibility of such an accident. But no matter. She could not fail to appreciate that she was

good-looking. When standing before her glass she must have acknowledged that much. The black, oval eyes, veiled by their long lashes; the pretty lips, just so far parted as to show the pearl-like teeth; the soft bloom upon her cheek; the pure flesh-tints, heightened by their contact with the dark hair, could not have passed quite unnoticed. She would not have been woman had she not somewhat gloried in her beauty. But if she gloried, as no doubt she did, it was not selfishly. Whilst pleased that her features were not plain or common-place, she but appraised them at their value —for the pleasure which they brought to her father, and, as her fluttering spirit had of late fondly imagined, to one other.

And yet, that morning, she was not so sure about the latter point. Before Martin left for Chudlegh, he had grown day by day brighter and more gentle. He had looked in three or four times a week, mostly

of an evening, and had paid her more attention than once he did. She had marked the sparkle in his eye, the tremor in his voice, the occasional quiver on his lip, and had deduced from these and other signs—signs barely perceptible to any but a woman —that he was in love. And if in love, with whom, unless herself? Which inference being attained, her heart had first fluttered and then beat softly. Nathless, she had not attempted to explore its depths or to ascertain whether it were her own—any longer to give or to withhold. Until that morning, she had been content with vague dreams; happy when Martin was present; clinging more closely to her father when alone with him.

Some weeks had elapsed since Martin's return to Camptown, nor had she seen him more than half a dozen times. And when he did look in, he was not only dull, but his manner harsh. He appeared to be

the prey to a grief which she could not understand. He was no longer the Martin of old, and the love which she was on the verge of returning seemed to have eluded her touch. That it was so caused her to be both vexed and uneasy. In truth, her heart was far more stricken than she had imagined; her dreams had been far more precious than she was willing to admit. And now a void had filled their place, promoting a weariness which she could not comprehend. Her life was darkened, although she struggled to evade the fact. Her peace had fled, although she attempted to conceal its flight.

No wonder, then, that she felt out of tune, even on that bright spring day. No wonder that the needle pricked her finger; that her lips trembled; and that she yearned half-consciously over the delightful past. No wonder that in vain the sun attempted to woo her smile; that in vain the pet

fantail, strutting on the lawn, paraded its snow-white beauty; that, disregarded, the violets beneath her window perfumed the air. Dorothy was not to be won by such as they.

At last, she could endure her wayward thoughts no longer. She threw down the wool-work, tossed her threaded needle on its top, and started to her feet. She would try whether a brisk walk could attune the elements which warred within. She knew that "to cure the mind's wrong bias, spleen," exercise was a powerful remedy. Fling but a stone, she had heard it said, and the giant dies. In any case, she would make the attempt, and ascertain if the panacea were effective.

Moving quickly over the lawn, she entered that little dell where the miniature cascade tumbled over the moss-grown rocks. She stood under the chestnut tree and watched the driven spray as it rose iris-coloured from

out the basin. Her mind reverted to the time when she had sat there with Martin; to the happiness which she had then experienced; to the sweet musings in which she had indulged. But only for a moment. That was no place in which to test her panacea. The memories which it evoked were too greatly in accord with her then reflections. So, turning her back upon the spot, she entered a tree-covered path which followed the sinuous hedgerows that lay beyond—a path which now descended into narrow hollows, now mounted pigmy hills; sometimes running parallel with the stream, sometimes looking down upon it from above. It was her favourite walk; one which savoured of the country, and where Camptown, with its many chimneys and clouds of smoke, might have been thought miles away. The murmur of the trickling rill strengthened the illusion. Violets and primroses, nestling on the

banks, spoke more of rural lanes than of suburban dreariness. Now and again, the breath of "fair kine" came wafted from the fields, or the defiant note of a distant chanticleer rang in the still air. Presently, the path made a sharp bend to the right, and then to the right again, until it reached the trees which circled the archery-ground.

The further Dorothy went, and the faster she walked, the more she regained of her normal composure. Each time that she set down her foot some portion of the spleen which had invaded her breast was trampled in the dust. She culled a violet here, and a primrose there, until her left hand could hold no more. And how chaste the primroses—how sweet the violets! She pressed them to her lips, and inhaled their fragrance. She considered those jewels of the field; that they toiled not, neither did they spin; yet how glorious their apparel. That, as they were cared for, even so was she. As

they? Nay, more than they. Their life was but for a day, hers was to be sempiternal. Her mouth still quivered, whilst her eyes grew soft. She trusted, though still sad. She gathered comfort, believing her trouble to be overshadowed by the wings of love.

The walk, and possibly the emotion from which she had suffered, made her feel tired, and she determined to rest a while in one of the summer-houses giving upon the archery-ground. She selected the one which stood within the belt of trees, that to which Fanny and the Rev. Kidwelly Thompson had retired after David was wounded in his stockinged leg. She neared it with downcast eyes, and stood upon its threshold before lifting her glance from the path. That done, she started, and a vivid blush overspread her face. The summer-house was already tenanted.

It so happened that on that selfsame

morning Martin had received a letter from his mother. The news which it conveyed had been so couched as to minimize the pain which it could not fail to give. But pain it had brought, however softened by maternal fondness. For it told how Agnes and Percy were to be wedded that very day.

Martin had returned to Camptown before the first week of the new year was entirely sped. He had employed the time between then and Christmas Day by trudging on foot from place to place. He had attempted to dumb misery by bodily fatigue, and in some measure had succeeded. Since then, he had stuck bravely to the desk in Fosset Lane, and—irony of fate—now that he had no specific object to attain, success had dogged his every step. He sighed bitterly to think that such should be; that the toil of the past year should have resulted in profits which a few months before he had so greatly desired for the sake of one now

dead to him for ever; that Pelion should be vainly heaped on Ossa, and they as vainly on Olympus. But, notwithstanding, he laboured hard, if that he might diminish the ceaseless gnawing at his breast. Nor, until that morning, had any communication from Chudlegh disturbed the phantom which he sought to bury. No doubt he had felt that the blow must fall, that the day must come when Percy and Agnes would stand before God's altar and swear the one to cherish the other until death did part them. But he had put away the thought, had left it on the farther side of the hill which he had topped, nor had he turned back to take it up. At last it had found legs, outrun his lagging feet, and regained his side. Once there, it clung tightly to his arm, nor would loose its grip.

He felt that it would be useless to go that morning to the office; that under such circumstances work would be impossible.

He must tide over the weary hours of that wedding-day as best he could. The grounds of Barton Hall were at his disposal, and there at least he should be undisturbed. So, he had quitted the Widow Toler's shortly after breakfast, and, leaving the Hall to his left, had, after treading some time the very path by which Dorothy had come, found a refuge in the summer-house.

When Dorothy first saw him, he was gazing vacantly at a letter which lay upon the table. So great was his absorption that he did not mark the shadow which her figure cast at his feet, and before he did so the blush on her cheek had fled.

"Mr. Ffrench!" she exclaimed. "Is it possible?"

Recalled to the present by the sound of her voice, Martin raised his head.

"Yes, Miss Grierson," he said, starting from the bench. "I trust that I am not an intruder."

"An intruder—on the contrary. Papa likes you to make use of the grounds."

It was the first occasion on which they had been quite alone. Business detained Martin during the day, and in the evening, unless some dinner-engagement or ball supervened, her father was always at home. Then, of an afternoon, Miss Lander would be by to play duenna. But now, it was not yet noon, and the good lady was immersed in the cupboards of her storeroom.

"Pray do not let me disturb you," said Dorothy, seating herself on the bench which lined the inner walls of the summer-house. "No. I meant to imply that I thought you would be in town, and was therefore astonished to find you here."

"I could not go to the office to-day, Miss Grierson. It would have been useless to attempt it."

There was a ring of bitterness in his voice which did not escape Dorothy's notice.

"Have you received bad news?" she inquired with concern; "or, are you ill, Mr. Ffrench? You look haggard. Oh, I hope it is not that!"

"It is not that," echoed Martin drearily.

If his words relieved Dorothy as to his health, she knew that something very serious had happened. For one fleeting moment she raised her dark eyes timidly to his face, and then let them fall upon the flowers which she still carried in her hand. She felt that he had a sorrow which she knew not of, and which might possibly account for his less frequent visits.

On his part, Martin thought how pure her face—pure as the chaste primroses, sweet as the scented violets on which she looked. That Agnes had been like her! Even that Dorothy had been his sister. But he was alone—uncared for. And a mist gathered in his eyes, and the letter, which he had snatched from the table,

trembled in his hand. Almost without knowing what he did, the why or wherefore, he placed this on her knee.

"Read it," he said. "It will tell you everything."

And Dorothy, obedient, read.

"My Dearest Boy,

"I have not troubled you with any home news since you were compelled to leave us, but you well know that you have been continually in my thoughts. I do not even now seek to rake up the past, or to increase your trouble. And yet, the time is arrived when a longer silence might not be conducive to your peace; when you might learn from others, or from the newspapers, that which is so soon to take place; when the blow might fall upon you without the slightest preparation. Believing such to be the case, I can restrain my pen no longer. And perhaps—perhaps, dear Martin,

that blow will come more lightly from a mother's hand than in any other way. Blanche and Arthur are to be married on Friday next, the fifteenth; and—but I know that it is unnecessary to write the words—they will not be the only couple to stand before the altar. The wedding is to be a double one.

"Dear Martin, I shall think of you more than of aught else when I am that day in the dear old church. There, in a place consecrated by so many happy memories, I shall pray most fervently that the Almighty may be pleased to bless an absent, and perhaps, in his sorrow, the dearer son."

At first Dorothy could not grasp all that the letter implied.

"The fifteenth!" she exclaimed. "Why, to-day is the fifteenth. And you not at your brother's wedding!"

"How could I be?" cried Martin almost fiercely.

"How could you be?" murmured Dorothy faintly. And she trembled, remembering that two marriages were to take place that morning—probably were taking place at that very hour.

"Listen, Miss Grierson," continued Martin, paying no attention to the girl's agitation. "Suppose that you loved, and found, all suddenly, that your love had been given in vain. Suppose—— But it is absurd to talk to you about such things; you cannot understand what I must feel."

"Perhaps I can—a little," said Dorothy tremulously. She began to see it all now, and to appreciate that her sweet musings had been built upon the sand.

Martin regarded her with surprise. Had she, too, he asked himself, been disappointed in her love.

"Suppose, then, that the one to whom

you could have entrusted your life had proved unworthy——"

"No, not that," interrupted Dorothy impulsively. "That could never be."

"Suppose," continued Martin, heedless of her words, "that, after years of weary expectation—years in which the loved one had led you to believe that she was yours—she were one day to spurn your claim and prefer wealth to honour, luxury to contentment, a tainted life to a pure heart. Suppose——"

"Stop, stop, Mr. Ffrench! No one could act so basely."

"But *she* did," cried Martin impetuously. "I had loved her since we were boy and girl together. She knew how deep, how lasting was the feeling which ruled my life. She led me to think that it was returned. Until, one day, she cast me off; told me that her love was mine, but that she had sold herself for gold."

There could be no longer room for doubt. His words left no loophole of escape, and the dream of the last few months had proved fallacious. Martin had loved another, nor ever thought of her. And Dorothy felt weary and sad. The sunshine of her life appeared to have fled for ever, and yet she could not lay the blame at Martin's door. To her he had always been true, considerate, gentle. The pain, from which she suffered, resulted from her own blindness, her own folly; but that made it no less hard to bear. In the first brunt of her distress the lesson so lately culled from the jewels of the field had lost its virtue; the overshadowing wings, which just now stilled her heart, were veiled by the thunder-cloud which had rolled betwixt them and herself. But that could be only for a season. In a few minutes her strength returned, the cloud was dispersed, the teaching of the flowers recurred. A pity,

for Martin's sorrow obliterated other and more selfish thoughts.

"Mr. Ffrench," she said with conviction, raising her pale face to his, "that girl, whoever she may be, when deceiving you deceived herself. Had she loved, she would not have forsaken."

"And yet," exclaimed Martin, "she said as much."

"She may have believed the truth of what she said. But wealth can never persuade the woman who sincerely loves to forsake the loved one."

"Would that she had been like you, Miss Grierson."

Dorothy blushed.

"Or, would that I had a sister like you," he continued gloomily. "But I am alone, an outcast from home, banished even from my mother."

The despairing accent in which he spoke touched the girl's heart. His utter prostra-

tion quickened her tenderness. She, too, knew what it meant to be motherless.

"Let me fill the place of sister," she said gently.

Martin's face brightened, though little did he reck the self-renunciation which the offer entailed.

"If you would be so good," he murmured.

The compact was sealed, but it did not at once produce any closer *rapprochement*. Dorothy silently contemplated her flowers, whilst her companion was absorbed in his sad reflections. They had stumbled into a relationship which, ten minutes before, neither had thought possible, and which caused both one and the other to be somewhat perplexed as to the next move. At last, a brilliant idea suggested itself to Martin.

"But, Miss Grierson," he said, "if you are to be my sister, I must call you 'Dorothy.'"

Dorothy's heart fluttered. The name sounded so altogether wonderful as pronounced by Martin.

"And you must call me 'Martin.'"

"I suppose that I must—Martin."

"Thank you, Dorothy."

Few people believe in the validity of Platonic love as between two persons of opposite sexes. And no doubt any such love is not only morally impossible, but would be essentially unnatural. But it did not occur to Martin and Dorothy that they stood committed even to a Platonic love. Martin, in his despair, sought a comforter: Dorothy, in her womanly compassion, had brought a consolation. Nothing could be more natural, and nothing has been done more frequently. The man who has lost a wife is wild with grief. He treasures the contents of the lost one's wardrobe, forbids her knick-knacks to be touched by any but himself, leaves the glass of sherry which

she had half-emptied undisturbed upon the tray. Then comes the schoolfellow, the bridesmaid, the bosom friend—whispering comfort, full of reminiscences, mingling her tears—and the dead love is forgotten in the new, the void is occupied, and life jogs along pretty much as it did before. Or, death has snatched her betrothed from the arms of a girl whose wealth is untold. Then comes his double, making love by proxy—and, presto, the rent is darned.

But—

> "Justice, while she winks at crimes,
> Stumbles on innocence sometimes,"

and the compact between Martin and Dorothy was beyond cavil innocent. Neither of the twain had an ulterior motive. Their alliance had been cemented by their misery.

"Dorothy," said Martin, after a long pause, "you will not mention a word of this to anybody—not even to Miss Lander, please."

"You may trust me, Martin."

"I am glad," he continued, "that you were the one to find me in my trouble. Your sympathy has been a great relief. I could not have spoken so freely to any one else."

Again Dorothy raised her dark eyes to his, and the smile with which she regarded him was truly sisterlike.

"Perhaps I had better say 'good-bye' now," he went on, taking her hand.

"Good-bye, Martin. You will be sure to come and see papa soon."

"Yes, soon;" and he left the summer-house.

Then the smile by which Dorothy had sought to encourage Martin faded. There was no longer a necessity for self-control, no longer an abnormal excitement to buoy her spirits, and she was left to the sole companionship of her grief. But she would be brave. She was determined to be brave.

The overshadowing wings should not shadow her in vain; the flowers which she had just now plucked should not lose their virtue. She was still the apple of her father's eye, the support of his later years. And then, Martin had accepted her for a sister, and needed all the comfort she could give. She persuaded herself that her course was plain; that it was lighted by a noonday sun, and not to be mistaken.

After a solitary lunch, she again took up her wool-work. But, despite her efforts, the needle pricked her finger, the canvas became blurred, she unpicked as many stitches as she made. She had been stabbed more deeply than she could tell, nor would the wound be healed at her simple bidding. Nature was too strong for that. She might try to feel resigned, but resignation is the child of Time. "The man of theory" may twang his bow, the savage don his war-paint, their mingling

voices exclaim—"Eureka! To be happy, care but for Self." And yet, not so. Even in these days of charlatanism, Fact will prove stronger than Theory—the rain which falls from heaven will besmirch the war-paint. At such crises as that which had occurred to Dorothy, Nature, and she alone, is the *dea victrix*.

But Dorothy grappled bravely with her pain. If she could not conquer then and there, she would not lay down her arms so soon as the first attack had been delivered. Possibly, had she been moulded after another fashion, she might have done so. Possibly, had she lived in an earlier age, she might have wished to hide her grief within the cloister. But to do that would have been to Dorothy as a living death, and could have led to naught save to a repentance to be repented of. She had no desire to turn her back upon the world because in her own person she had been stricken. She felt that

Self was not the one consideration; that, though a heavy burden might have been laid upon her shoulders, the world was still replete with blessings; that she must submit, not murmur; that according to her submission would be "the recompense of the reward."

And yet, that afternoon, the wool-work fell unheeded to her lap, and her long eyelashes stood thick with tears. So deep was her muse, that Miss Lander entered the room unnoticed, and for a few seconds contemplated the girl without being observed.

"Bless me, child!" she exclaimed, having completed her mental photograph. "If you are not as difficult to rouse as one of the Seven Sleepers."

Dorothy started, and the tell-tale colour mounted to her cheek.

"Tears, too," proceeded Miss Lander. "Whatever can be the matter?"

"I have not felt quite well to-day, auntie," explained Dorothy.

Miss Lander regarded her critically. "You are not in the habit, dear, of crying about a headache. You must be feeling very bad indeed."

"Not very bad—a little out of sorts. I shall soon be better now that you are here."

"Have you been alone all the morning, child?"

"There have been no actual callers, auntie. But—but, shortly after eleven, I met Martin—Mr. Ffrench, I mean—in the garden."

"Pray, what was he doing in the garden at that hour? I should have thought that business would claim his attention, at least so early in the forenoon."

Dorothy hesitated. She was truthfulness itself; but then she had promised Martin not to reveal, even to Miss Lander, his piteous story.

"I—I think that he did not feel quite equal to going into town," she faltered.

"Then Martin is on the sick-list too, eh, child?"

"He is not exactly unwell," stammered Dorothy; "but he is in great trouble." And tears again glittered on the girl's long lashes.

"Mercy on us," exclaimed Miss Lander. "No one dead, I hope."

"No, not that. It's something worse—much worse."

"Bless me, child! What can be worse than that?"

Dorothy thought of her own trouble—of that death in life to which she fancied herself to be doomed.

"Auntie, I cannot tell you what it is. But something very dreadful has happened.

"You cannot tell me what it is. And wherefore, may I ask?"

"Because—because," returned Dorothy,

blushing, "I promised Mr. Ffrench to keep his secret."

"Hey-day," thought the elder lady. "Behold a goodly mystery. About some trifle, too, I warrant me. Probably the lad has been disappointed in love, and made the child his confidante." And her curiosity was excited.

"You have not refused him, I presume, Dorothy?"

"Oh no, it is not that," protested Dorothy, turning very pale. "Indeed, it is not that. What could have made you dream of such a thing?"

The pallor which had blanched the girl's face could not escape Miss Lander's penetration. It was so intense as to betray a great emotion, and helped the good lady to guess one-half the truth. If Martin had not been disappointed, she felt sure that Dorothy was, and therefore the tears. She was both vexed and anxious. Vexed that

Martin should be so blind; anxious as to Dorothy's future.

"Well, child, I had thought—— But no matter what I thought. Possibly, I have been nothing more than an old fool. And so, Martin has made you his confidante?"

"Yes, auntie."

"And you consoled him as best you could."

"I could do no otherwise, auntie dear. He seemed so very miserable. He told me that he had no sister, and that—that circumstances had banished him from his mother. And I—I promised to be his sister. What else could I do, auntie."

As she spoke, Dorothy did not raise her face from the work which she had resumed, and Miss Lander was able to study it without risk of detection.

"Handsome is, as handsome does," she at last remarked, enigmatically.

"Nay; but I want your candid opinion.

And then, Martin asked whether he might call me 'Dorothy,' and said that I must call him 'Martin.'"

"To both of which propositions you, of course, agreed," said Miss Lander dryly.

"Well—yes. I thought that there could be no harm in doing so."

The good lady's face cleared, as if by magic. All then was not lost; and perhaps the child was nearer to the happiness which she thought to have forfeited than at any previous time. It was evident that Dorothy and Martin were on the threshold of a Platonic friendship, and a Platonic friendship, she knew as well as most people, is apt to be the precursor of a happier love. She had taken a fancy to Martin, and esteemed his character. She had no doubt but that he would prove a good husband to this her adopted daughter, and, on second thoughts, considered that he was on the high road towards a consummation so desirable. If

he were suffering, as she presumed him to be, from an irremediable disappointment, the foreground of his heart must consist of a melancholy void, be tantamount to a chamber swept and empty. And who so likely or fitted to garnish it anew as Dorothy.

"You have not told me whether I was right," pleaded Dorothy.

"Handsome is, as handsome does," repeated Miss Lander, apparently determined not to commit herself more plainly.

"Don't be tiresome, auntie," insisted the girl. "I really want to know."

"Well, my dear, I do not think that you have done *very* wrong." And, stooping down, the warm-hearted spinster enforced her words by a kiss which betrayed how plenary the indulgence.

CHAPTER II.

NARCOSIS.

That evening Martin and the Globe-trotter dined together in the sitting-room of which the former was, for the time being, supposed to be sole proprietor. Indeed, since his return from Chudlegh, he could almost regard it as his own. One result of his late trouble was that he lived more at home; and, *pari passu*, the Widow Toler had been forced to relinquish the habit of resting her tenderly nurtured limbs in his one arm-chair.

After dinner, the Globe-trotter brought from his own apartment the canvas-covered, compressible frame on which he was wont to lounge, and, sitting down thereon, produced

a pipe, and with it a stick of black-looking, strong tobacco. On the table at his elbow stood a tumbler of whiskey-and-water—cold. Carpet slippers adorned his feet, whilst the lowermost buttons of his waistcoat were released from their corresponding button-holes.

The tumbler was well-nigh filled to the brim; but not on that account was the Globe-trotter an inveterate toper. After the manner of his kind, he took but little stimulant during dinner. He preferred tea —tea, not as brewed in the housewifely teapot so well known to gossips, but cooked in a "billy," with a due proportion of sugar added to the mass, and guiltless of milk or cream. That was to make tea as the Globe-trotter understood the beverage, and as he had been accustomed to it in the Waimate County—a strong, sugary mixture, to be consumed out of "pannikins" which might hold an imperial pint. But, now that he

once more reposed in the bosom of civilization, tea such as that had become impossible.

Martin sat on the other side of the hearth. The bright gas, the close-drawn curtains, the comfortable atmosphere of the room had failed in giving to his spirits a healthier tone. He looked woe-begone. So much so that it was fortunate for the Globe-trotter that an independent, wandering life and the self-reliance which it had fostered rendered him impervious to the magnetism of a hypochondria which would have affected most men.

Bachelor-quarters, especially of an evening, are usually productive of a sensuousness grateful to the body and calming to the mind, of a relaxation in the nervous system which cannot be attained in a crowded room. The friendly pipe, the careless remitted converse, the assurance that no trouble is likely to interpose itself between the then and bed, act as soporifics, nor per-

mit the intrusion of a disturbing element. But none of these influences availed with Martin. The letter which he had received that morning could not so readily be forgotten.

"Laddie," said Macpherson, "you'd best taste a drop o' whiskey. Not that I would recommend a man to drown care in the bottle. But you seem out o' sorts, and a touch o' the same might do you good."

"I *am* out of sorts, Globe-trotter. I received a letter to-day which has reopened an old wound."

"I thought that something o' the kind had happened," muttered the other. Then he added aloud, "An' if you did, the more reason that you should take an old man's advice."

"It would do no good, Macpherson. Whiskey cannot cure an aching heart."

"Nae, lad. But a wee drop might gie it a better tone." Saying which, the Globe-

trotter rose from his lounge, and compounded a second tumbler.

"Take a sup o' that, lad," he said, handing the glass to Martin. "If it does nae good, it can do nae harm."

Martin accepted it gratefully. In truth, he needed some stimulant of the kind, for the varying and long-continued emotions of the day had reduced him below par.

"Now light a pipe, lad. There's mony a wholesome thought comes frae tobacco."

This time, Martin obeyed without a murmur, and for some minutes the pair silently inhaled any wisdom which could be afforded by the Globe-trotter's prescription.

"You've been down on your luck for a length o' time," Macpherson at last remarked. "I've noted it, but nae meddled with it. 'Taint no manner o' use for a man to peer into his mate's 'swag.'"

"Globe-trotter, I have been disappointed in a dear hope."

"An' I suppose that a girl lies at bottom o' the disappointment," remarked the other dryly. "She does most times."

Martin coloured. "I won't tell you a lie, Globe-trotter—she does. And what a girl she might have been, and, as I thought—was."

"There's few on 'em to be trusted, lad. Leastways amang those whom I've come across. And yet there *is* one who, if I'd been younger——" And Macpherson, possibly urged thereto by the vanity of his regret, broke off suddenly.

"I have worked," continued Martin, speaking as much to himself as to his companion, "in order to forget. But to no purpose. The trouble is as hard to bear now as it was some weeks ago."

"Maybe, lad, you've no worked i' the right road. Maybe you've thought mair than good about yoursel'. And I ne'er found much balm to come o' that."

Possibly, Macpherson was correct. Possibly, too, Martin knew him to be so, but he made no outward profession to that effect.

"An' what have ye been doing the bonnie day?" inquired the Globe-trotter.

"Walking," returned the other laconically.

"On your ain legs for above eight hours, laddie!"

"Well, in the forenoon, I rested a while in a summer-house at the Hall."

"An' rested by yoursel', nae doubt."

"Why on earth shouldn't I have done?" exclaimed Martin petulantly. Then, remarking a twinkle in Macpherson's eye, he added, "What are you driving at, Globe-trotter? What new fad is working in that old brain of yours?"

"Nae, lad. I peer into nae man's secret."

Martin could not restrain a smile at this display of native caution. He knew that

the Globe-trotter would not at any time commit himself if it could be avoided. But, in the present instance, he had nothing to conceal. That Dorothy had found him in the summer-house was an accident, and not the result of collusion.

"Well, if you must know," he said, with a short laugh, "Miss Grierson came there, and sat for a little time."

"And nae doubt the counsel that she gave was good."

Martin winced. Could the Globe-trotter have been passing that way, and heard something of their conversation? Or, with his usual shrewdness, had he guessed the truth? His knowledge of Macpherson's manly, straightforward nature led him to believe the latter supposition to be the true one.

"You are right," he said seriously. "It was fortunate that she happened to find me there."

Then the conversation took another turn, nor was the subject of Martin's trouble again mentioned. But, on parting for the night, Macpherson grasped his hand.

"Laddie," he said, "I'm not one to give advice unsought, an' am nae so sure that I do weel to give it now. But, when your mind is troubled, and the trouble is very sair, gang to Miss Dorothy. She'll mend it better, I'm thinking, nor the old Globe-trotter."

From some cause, which he could not have explained, Martin rose on the following day in better spirits, and, when he reached the office, took a more real interest in his work. Possibly, now that Agnes was the wife of another, now that regret was unavailing, he could contemplate his loss more calmly. Possibly, too, he remembered that he had found a counsellor to whom he could always resort, to whom even the Globe-trotter had recommended

him to apply when in trouble. And to have found a counsellor—especially in one so fair—was sure to prove a sedative to a man of Martin's temperament. Not being self-centred, he was unable to stand alone. Being generously minded and large-hearted, his spirit required companionship, and not only that, but communion with those whom it could respect and love.

"Ay," he murmured, as he bent more cheerfully over the desk, "Macpherson was right. I have brooded too intently over the past, and to the exclusion of all else." The mere thought that such had been the case strengthened his growing purpose, and clothed the future in brighter hues.

"Let me see," he went on. This is Saturday, and we close soon after one. I can lunch in town, and, after that, return on foot to 'the diggings.' I want exercise —it will stir the blood. I must find some

portion of that φάρμακον νηπενθές bestowed on Helen by the wife of Thome. And, yes —perhaps I ought to call at the Hall and see Dorothy."

It was curious, even to Martin, how slowly the minutes sped after he had reached the above determination. His heart had ached for so long a time; of late he had been so wrapt in the past, that now, when the first signs of a coming dawn appeared, he became impatient, almost irritable.

"Fleming," he exclaimed, "it's useless to think of work. I cannot 'tot' up these accounts any more than a child. My brother, you know, was married yesterday, and—— Well, never mind the 'and,'" he continued, with a faint smile. "The fact is, I am out of sorts, and need a stiff walk to put me right."

Fleming regarded him curiously, but with no visible surprise. Whatever his

thoughts, he had learned the value attaching to the irrepression.

"If you will be guided by me, Mr. Martin," he said, "you will start at once. Business requires a clear brain and an undivided attention."

Martin was in luck. All the advice which he had received during the past four and twenty hours tallied with his inclination. Therefore, like advice so often is, it had not been rejected.

"You argue like a book, Fleming," he exclaimed, collecting his papers, and thrusting them into a drawer. "And I'll e'en 'make tracks,' as Macpherson would say. Well, good day; I shall be here, without fail, on Monday."

"Good day, Mr. Martin. I trust that a walk will do you good, sir."

Martin groped his way down the dark, uneven-treaded stair which led from the office, and rushed into the lane. He made

an early and hurried lunch at the first respectable restaurant which came in his way, and then turning his back upon the town, followed the road taken by the Globe-trotter and himself so many months before. At first, he walked as if intent upon making his point within a given time. But presently, looking at his watch, he found that it was barely one o'clock, and, were he to continue at the same pace, he must reach the Hall at least half an hour too soon. He reduced his stride and restrained his impetuosity until, at last, he almost sauntered. The pleasant April weather, a feeling that the load which he had borne so long was lightened, that he had an end in view inspired hope. The misery of the last few weeks was succeeded by a healthier tone, and which was made no less welcome by the suddenness of its advent. After a while, he began even to murmur that refrain now almost forgotten—

"In what land the sun does visit
Brisk are we, whate'er betide:
To give space for wandering is it
That the world was made so wide?"

The words rose to his lips spontaneously, unconsciously. He repeated them more than once without being aware that he had done so. But, at last came knowledge, and with it a broken spell. His recovery was not as yet so thorough as to permit him consciously to repeat that pæan of brighter days.

As he neared the Hall, his step betrayed a greater hesitation. Should he go to the front-door and boldly ask for Dorothy? Or, should he make for the summer-house, and trust to the chapter of accidents? Were he to go to the Hall, he should probably find not only Dorothy, but Miss Lander. He liked the latter, and, upon ordinary occasions, had no sort of objection to her society. But—she had not declared herself to be his sister. He felt that he

could not talk openly to Dorothy if she were present. At last, and although by so doing he might run the chance of missing Dorothy altogether, he determined in favour of the summer-house.

But he approached it by a different path to that of yesterday. In place of following the back-road, and leaving the Hall some distance to his left, he gained the front-door, and then boldly took the lawn. By which manœuvre, Ulysses-like, he displayed not only valour, but cunning. He trusted that Dorothy would see him as he crossed the open. Nor did he scheme in vain.

Dorothy and Miss Lander, returning from the dining-room, re-entered the boudoir in time to catch a glimpse of his figure as it disappeared behind the shrubs. Dorothy started, but resumed her work. Miss Lander smiled, and applied herself to her knitting. She was engaged upon a

stocking, and had arrived at that, to a knitter, most important of all questions—the heel.

"It seems a bright afternoon, Dorothy," she remarked, her knitting-pins glittering in the sunlight.

"Very," said the girl abstractedly.

"Do you not think that a little fresh air would do you good, love?"

Dorothy coloured. The air, as it stole through the open window, would appear able to enhance the bloom on her cheek without the necessity of any greater exertion.

"It will do you good to go into the garden, child. You spend far too much of the day indoors."

"I am ready at any time, auntie," returned Dorothy obediently.

"Do not wait for me, dear. Not this afternoon, at least. My old bones feel weary, and—and I must finish this heel before returning to the Lodge."

"I do not like to leave you by yourself, auntie."

"Nonsense, love. I can take care of myself."

So Dorothy, having first kissed the kind old soul, demurely left the room. But, the door once closed, she flew rather than ran upstairs. There, she seized her hat — a crimson-lined, broad-brimmed hat, which was undoubtedly becoming to her brunette complexion—and threw a cloak over her shoulders. That done, she regained the hall, and left the house by a side entrance which would enable her to reach the archery-ground without having to pass before the boudoir window. There was not the slightest occasion to have taken this byway, but love has the reputation of making its votaries timid. And Dorothy, notwithstanding her self-assurances to the contrary, was deeply in love.

When in sight of the summer-house, she

proceeded more leisurely. Her quick eye had detected some one to be within, and, supposing that it were Martin, it would never do to appear in too great a hurry. In fact, long before she reached it, her glance was bent upon the ground, and she almost trembled.

"Dorothy!" exclaimed Martin, advancing to meet her. "How good of you to come! Did you see me as I crossed the lawn?"

"Yes," she said, lifting her face shyly. "And I thought that you might want your —sister."

"You thought rightly. But was not Miss Lander with you?"

"She was in the boudoir, and I think," continued Dorothy, hesitating, "that she must have seen you. But she declared that she was tired, and could not leave her knitting."

"Then we can have a long talk—all to ourselves. And I need your help so much."

"My help!" she exclaimed.

"Your help," he repeated. "But let us sit down. We can talk more comfortably in the summer-house than standing here."

"The fact is," he went on, when they had settled themselves upon the bench, "that, since I left you yesterday, it has crossed my mind that trouble may have made me selfish. I am sure that the Globe-trotter thinks so."

Dorothy looked at him incredulously. He was the last person in the world, she thought, to whom a charge of selfishness could attach.

"And so, I have come to you for advice."

"But how can I assist you?" she inquired timidly.

"If I am ever to be happy, happiness must come from without. I must be of some use, and feel that my life is not altogether wasted. Business engages me

by day; but, Dorothy, can you suggest anything that will occupy me by night?"

A smile brightened her face. At last she understood his drift. She reflected for a moment, and then said—

"There is the night-school, and I know that Mr. Prothero would be glad of another teacher."

"The very thing," he exclaimed triumphantly. "See what it is to have a sister! Wise as he fancies himself, the Globe-trotter would not have thought of that."

"I am not so sure," said Dorothy, jealous for an absent friend. "Mr. Macpherson is tender-hearted and thoughtful, for all his manner may be a trifle rough. Perhaps you did not ask for his advice?"

"Well, no, not exactly. But last night he volunteered a remark which proves that he has some wisdom. He told me, when in trouble, to come to you."

"What could he have meant by that?" she said.

"I have not the remotest idea. It was a most foolish thing to say, don't you think?"

Dorothy would not express an opinion. "As it is," she remarked, "you have come almost too late. The night-school will not be kept open for more than another month. The days are lengthening, and, as they do so, the attendance dwindles."

"Then I must begin at once," said Martin. "The next night is—when?"

"Tuesday. Miss Lander and I go on Tuesdays and Fridays."

"Then Tuesday be it. And may I come to dinner? I should prefer to go with you the first time. I should feel much more at home if I did."

So it came about that, on the following Tuesday, Martin accompanied Dorothy and Miss Lander to the school. To him this first

essay brought a novel experience. He had taught, years ago, in the Sunday school at Rothbury, when his class consisted of half a dozen boys. Now, some twenty girls, whose ages might range from fifteen to twenty-five, were entrusted to his care. At Rothbury, his pupils had been orderly and subdued, either because they were ill-fed or from rustic bashfulness. Now, they were anything but subdued, and their manner was anything but coy. They were restless; they were talkative. It would seem as if they missed the everlasting whir of the machinery amidst which they spent the day, and attempted to reproduce it in the shape of a ceaseless hum.

When Martin entered the schoolroom, his eyes were dazzled by the many gas-jets, which presented a sharp contrast to the dark without. The two hundred or more scholars which it contained appeared to him but a confused, not-to-be-disentangled

crowd. The air was comfortably warm, but flavoured with a something which told of cotton and heated workshops, of oil, of quickly rotating spindles and clacking looms.

Presently, from out the chaos, he could distinguish the figures of men and youths, —their legs clothed in fustian, worn at the knee and occasionally falling in tatters over their clogs; the upper portion of their bodies cased in black cloth coats, greasy about the lapels, and threadbare at the elbows; a checkered handkerchief about their throats doing duty for a collar. He could distinguish the girls—their outer bodices of printed stuff, cut low in the neck and short in the sleeve; their long pinafores of unbleached calico reaching to the bottom of their short blue skirts; their white cotton stockings; the noisy, wooden-soled clogs with which they were shod. These things he apprehended by degrees.

He noticed, too, that, although in work-day dress, most had attempted to appear at their best. The upper leathers of their clogs had been smudged over; the pinafores were clean; hands had been scrubbed and faces well rinsed; hair had been smoothed and so much fluff as possible removed—all this proving a determination on the part of both girls and men to come before their teachers as decently as circumstances and the short time at their disposal would admit. This Martin apprehended, and, apprehending, his heart went out towards them. The burden which it had carried so long became less heavy.

That they should be there at all seemed marvellous. That they should be present in so great numbers seemed incredible. Rising whilst it was yet dark, standing upon their feet the day through, working for long hours in a heated atmosphere which must have predisposed them to

drowsiness — it was wonderful to think that sufficient energy survived for reading, writing, and arithmetic.

But soon Mr. Prothero rapped upon a table with his stick, and chaos resolved itself into something like method. He read a single collect, the collect for the week, and then, in clear, authoritative tones, said, "The next twenty minutes will be devoted to writing.—Monitors, give out the copy-books."

As the sharp rap of Mr. Prothero's stick resounded through the room, the loud hum was stayed; the classes grouped themselves about the desks; the teachers went to their respective stations. Martin observed with surprise that the men were taught by ladies, the girls by men. Possibly the rough lads exhibited a greater respect for teachers of the gentler sex, and were more submissive than they would have been if taught by men. It may have been so.

But it was open to doubt whether the same tactics proved equally successful when reversed. At least, after a short experience, Martin was inclined to suspect their efficacy. He felt sure that Dorothy could have exercised a more stringent control over his twenty girls than it was possible to him.

His class was bending over the copy-books in a variety of attitudes, an occasional eye had been stealthily raised to criticize the new master, the twenty tongues had been unusually silent, when, two minutes after the pens had been first dipped into the ink, the calm was broken.

"Teacher," exclaimed a voice, "am I doing it right?"

Martin looked over the shoulder of the speaker, a fair and somewhat pretty girl, and examined the work for which she had besought his attention. It consisted in a page of what are commonly known as "pot-

hooks and ladles." The page was more than half done, but done in such a way as to make Martin shiver. The ladles were dancing towards the pot-hooks, and the pot-hooks were suspended upon the ladles. The writer might be nimble with her fingers, but clearly had not been endowed with a straight eye.

"What is your name, my girl?" asked Martin kindly.

The question presented a grand opportunity for some of the more talkative not only to desist from their work, but to unloose their tongues.

"Please, teacher, she be Eliza Gratrix," they exclaimed in chorus.

"One at a time," interrupted Martin, good-humouredly; "one at a time, girls. Eliza, you must not write so fast. A little well done is better than a great deal done like that. Try to make all your strokes slope the same way. Try to do it like

this," he continued, taking the pen and describing a few pot-hooks on the page.

He had barely returned the pen when there came another applicant for notice. In fact, throughout the evening, each girl seemed to be actuated by a desire to attract his personal attention. Maybe because Martin's face was so bright and cheery.

"Teacher," said this other, "mayn't I have a copy-book with smaller writing? These big letters make my hand ache so."

The girl did not write badly, and Martin promised that she should have a new copy-book on Friday. "But go on with that one to-night," he added, "and do your best."

Then, he noticed one whose arms were lying upon the desk, and whose head lay upon her arms.

"Come, my girl," he said, resting a hand upon her shoulder; "don't be lazy. Remember, you are here to learn, not to sleep."

"Oh, teacher, I am *so* tired," she moaned,

endeavouring to stimulate her weary eyes by rubbing them with her knuckles.

"She be Mary Venables," exclaimed the chorus. "She àin't got no mother, teacher. Hoo works at Drayton's, and hoo gits up arter four, an' boils the kettle, an' sweeps th' houseplace, 'gain her faythèr goes to th' pit."

"Poor child," thought Martin. Nor could he find it in his heart to urge her more.

Soon, Mr. Prothero again rapped the table with his stick.

"Put away the writing materials," he said, "and distribute the books. The next twenty minutes will be devoted to reading."

Martin took up one of the books. It was divided into short lessons, each sentence being composed of easy words. "Page eight," he told his pupils. "Lesson twenty-two. Are you ready, girls?"

When, after a considerable interval, devoted to thumbing the pages and to the

comparison of one book with another, the majority had lighted upon lesson twenty-two, it was high time to begin. Most of the other classes, Martin observed, were already at work.

"You, Eliza, take the first sentence, please."

"'The—bird—sat—on—a—a—t-w-i-g,'" stammered Eliza. "A—t-w——"

"Nonsense, girl! Don't repeat the letters again. What do t-w-i-g spell? 'Twig,' do they not?"

"Yes, teacher."

"And don't you know what a twig is?"

"No, teacher."

"Do any of you girls? Not one! Well, you know what a tree is. And you know that a tree has branches. A twig is nothing more than a very small branch. Can you recollect that?"

"Yes, teacher."

"The next sentence, Mary."

"'Fish live in the water. The s-a-l-m-o-n,'" and then Mary came to a dead stop. She had been taken from the day school when very young, but had attended both Sunday school and church. She was a determined little body, and in the present instance quickly made up her mind not to be staggered by so short a word.

The s-a-l-m-o-n—the Solomon," she blurted out with the air of one who has overcome a difficulty. It was the nearest approach to the rhythm of the letters that she could attain.

Martin laid his book upon the desk.

"Look again, Mary. Not 'Solomon,' is it?"

If it was not that, Mary did not know what else it could be. If the letters had happened to spell "haddock" or "skate," she could have hit the right nail upon the head. But, as it was, they conveyed no meaning

to her poor warped brain. Nor were the others more capable.

Martin stood appalled before so great an ignorance. He explained that the salmon was a fish which lived in the sea, that at certain seasons it entered the rivers, that it could leap a fall of from twelve to fifteen feet in height, that it was a voracious feeder, and grew rapidly. Then he launched into the delights of fishing, described the rivers in which salmon were to be found, told of his own experiences, and, in fact, shortened the twenty minutes which should have been devoted to the class-book by a pleasant lecture.

The girls listened with brightening faces. If they could not understand all that was said, they were at least carried into new scenes, their interest became excited, and the monotony of the lesson was broken. When Mr. Prothero's stick summoned them to give up the books and take to their slates,

the sums did not appear so irksome as they had often been. They felt that the hour spent in the schoolroom that night had not been quite lost.

"Teacher," they said, when the school broke up, "thou mun coom again, an' tell us ither tales like yon."

"How did you get on, Martin?" inquired Dorothy, as they were returning to the Hall. "Did you find them very unruly?"

"Somewhat," he said wearily. For, be it remembered, to teach in a night-school after the day's hard work is not to repose on a couch of down. "Somewhat. But perhaps, ignorant rather than unruly."

"What else could you expect?" interposed Miss Lander. "Most of the poor things have never been at school before. Those who have, left it as babies. They pass their lives in a 'mill.' It's frames and looms form their landscape; its four walls constitute their horizon."

"It is wonderful," remarked Dorothy, "that, rising so early in the morning, and after a long day's toil, so many can be got together."

"And when they have been got together," said Martin, "they can make no great progress. The twenty minutes allotted to each study do not allow much opportunity for work."

"The mere coming does them good," cried Dorothy. "It fosters their self-respect, and promotes emulation."

"Dorothy," whispered Martin, "I can never thank you sufficiently for having induced me to go. However small the good to them, to me the gain has been enormous."

Ay. That was it. "'*Fais ton fait*, Do thy little stroke of work:' this is Nature's" —and, may it not be added, God's—"voice, and the sum of all the Commandments to each man!"

CHAPTER III.

VICE NESBITT, RESIGNED.

It was still April, although towards the end of the month, when on a certain morning Joseph Fleming sat all alone in Fosset Lane. The big clock of the Town Hall had struck nine, and Fleming had reached the warehouse at least three-quarters of an hour before the usual time. He was paler than common, his lips were compressed, and his hand shook uncontrollably. Nor was he seated at his own desk, but at Mr. Nesbitt's table, and in Mr. Nesbitt's peculiar chair. A letter was in his hand, but had long ceased to occupy his thoughts. The letter stated a simple fact, whilst his thoughts had

wandered on to consequences—to things past, to things to come, to that which was irretrievable, to that which the irretrievable might possibly develop.

Ralph Nesbitt was dead. That much he had gathered from the letter. The firm of Nesbitt, Ffrench, and Co. had lost its chief, and Martin remained—its one surviving partner. The prospect which the worthy gentleman's decease unfolded to Fleming's gaze was no doubt brilliant. For more than two years he had acted as manager, had been in receipt of a good salary, and enjoyed the confidence of his employers. He could have little fear but that at last he should become a partner, and that the position for which he had laboured was within his grasp. He stood, indeed, on the threshold of a long-cherished hope, where the one great ambition of his life was about to be fulfilled.

And yet, his mind was not altogether

so easy as the time and circumstance would appear to warrant. In fact, he had been taken unawares. Mr. Nesbitt's death, if not unexpected, had come sooner than was pleasant. He should have preferred to know the very day and hour on which it was to take place, and that at least six months before the event itself. In such case, he should have had ample time to do what he now wished that he had done. In such case, he could have made his position thoroughly secure, and rectified the past. He had ever intended to do so. He had even thought to commence the task during the previous year; but, instead, had persevered in his former course—just one year more. He gave the dice-box just one more trial, and attempted to cast a "nick." But the throw had been unsuccessful, and that morning he feared the results which might be attendant on his play. Not that his conscience, as most

men esteem conscience, was disturbed. That was callous—had been callous these many years; had been habitually suppressed, disregarded. Yet, he dreaded lest he had imperilled that for which he had toiled, to attain which he had spared neither time nor brain—the one step in life which he had so ambitioned, a partnership in the house of Nesbitt, Ffrench, and Co. He did not think that it was likely, but under present circumstances such an accident was possible.

Not that Fleming had been a thief, or embezzled moneys belonging to the Firm. What he had done was to falsify the books, and that in a wholesale way. He had attempted to exaggerate the effects of his management, in a hope that the increased profits which he made to appear on the balance-sheet might induce the Firm to elect him a partner. It was a dangerous game, and this April morning he regretted

to have played it. It had, too, been without the slightest effect, save in so far as it might react upon himself.

His method had been extremely simple. He had abstained from charging the transactions of the Firm with various items—insurance, commission, freight — which amounted to a large percentage on the turn-over. He had kept such items in suspense, to be debited to their proper accounts by degrees and when convenient. He had entered them in the books, but had left them unappropriated; so that his balances tallied, whilst the profit was made to appear far larger than it had actually been.

So transparent a trick could not have stood the scrutiny of the veriest tyro in book-keeping. But Fleming reckoned with whom he had to deal. Martin was more versed in the woods at Chudlegh than in the details of office-work. It was far easier

for him to find the seat of a hare, or to pad a fox, than to fathom the malpractices of an accountant.

Nor was Mr. Nesbitt a source of greater fear. He was not only old, but bent with rheumatism. He had almost run his course, and, for the last two or three years, his visits to the office had been few and far between. Then, Fleming was his *protégé*, whom he had taken from Bishop Oldham's Grammar School, whom he had broken to harness, and in whom he trusted to a far greater extent than he did in Martin. If, during his lifetime he had not elected him a partner, the circumstance was owing to no doubt as to his capabilities. On the contrary, he had shown the implicit faith which he possessed in his integrity by nominating him as his sole executor.

It was an odd thing to do, but Ralph Nesbitt had been an odd man. Possibly he had come to be so by having passed the

earlier years of a busy life in Spain, in Portugal, and Brazil. In the last, slavery was then rampant, accompanied by the vices which follow in its train. In the first, he had marked the results of clerical despotism, more especially in the ignorance which it fosters. When he sojourned in Portugal, that country had not received its constitution. No doubt, the scenes amidst which he had lived reacted upon a somewhat erratic temperament, and, on his return to England, eschewing orthodoxy, he allied himself with "the Brethren." He became one of that band which, whether in season or out of season, is the least bit overanxious as to the future of its generation. But, if he were careful for one thing more than another, it was for the conversion of the Jews.

Such, in a few words, was the man who had constituted Joseph Fleming his sole executor, who had furnished him with a

draft of his last will and testament, and who had exacted from him a pledge that he would do his utmost to carry out the intentions of the testator.

To Fleming, the provisions of the will were most distasteful. To his practical materialism, they tended uselessly to squander large sums of money on utopian projects. He carried the several legacies at the tips of his fingers. He repeated them to himself as he sat, that morning, before Mr. Nesbitt's table: — To "The Society for Promoting a Better Morality among Persons of Colour," £5000 (such donation to be expended in the transport of whilom slaves, from those countries in which they could earn a decent living, to their native land, in which they could not); to "The Society for Introducing the Bible into Spain," £5000; to "The Association for the Enforcement of Monogamy in Zanzibar," £5000; towards the erection of an

anti-Mormon temple in Salt Lake City, £5000; to "The Society for the Conversion of the Jews," £10,000; with remainder to Joseph Fleming, in token of esteem, and as a slight recompense for the burden laid upon his shoulders by the testator.

Twelve months were allowed in which to pay these legacies. But it was evident that during, or at the expiration of, that period £30,000 would have to be deducted from the capital of the Firm—would have to be deducted, that is, unless Martin could find another partner with a like amount of capital at his disposal. And this it was which Fleming dreaded. It stood to reason that no one would be so rash as to jeopardize that large sum without a previous examination of the books, and the books were not in a fit state to undergo the ordeal.

No wonder, then, that on that April morning the manager of Nesbitt, Ffrench, and Co. was pale, that his lips were com-

pressed, and that his hand shook uncontrollably. But ere long a look of determination settled upon his face. It might so happen that he could not escape from the consequences of his act, but he would do his utmost to prevent that act from being discovered. He must imbue Martin with the idea that to admit an outsider would be a doubtful policy; that, when Mr. Nesbitt's legacies had been paid, sufficient capital would remain successfully to continue the business; that a new-comer might promote dissension where all had worked so smoothly; and that as Mr. Nesbitt had trusted to his management so could Martin.

Martin! The name was as wormwood to his lips. Now that he was alone, no necessity existed for the repression of his feelings. He hated the fellow. His baser nature revolted against the other's superiority in everything except what related to business—revolted against his greater

frankness, his truthfulness, his better education, his laughter-loving face, his popularity. He would dearly like to see him grovelling in the dust, or, at least, dragged down to his own level. Why should they have been born to such different spheres? How came it that he was the underling—that his inferior in commercial knowledge was the master who supplied his daily bread? That it was so made him writhe with envy. He did not stop to consider whether the difference between them might not, in some measure, be attributable to himself; whether his own acts might not, in some sort, have enlarged the gulf. To do that was not in his nature. He was too firmly wedded to a pride which fostered an overweening sense of his own capacity. The world must appraise him at the value which he set upon himself; or, if it did not, the world was out of joint.

But there existed a something beyond.

Love had fanned the envy which he bore to Martin into jealousy. Since the dinner-party at the Widow Toler's he had been in a position to cultivate the acquaintance of men whom he had not previously known. On that occasion George Spencer had been struck by his shrewdness, and Ernest Clegg invited him to the "den." There he had fallen captive to Minnie Railton's sweet face and gentle manner. He was desperately in love, yet knew that his love was unreturned.

Strange incongruity in a man who was ever struggling to mount the social ladder. To whom a good marriage, as the world counts marriages good, was necessary for his purpose; but who was so dominated by self, so truly his own self's slave, as to permit a pretty face to imperil a lifelong determination. Yet so it was, and ever will be. The most self-willed, self-contained natures require a safety-valve. At times,

they produce more steam than the cylinder will consume; whilst the heavier the pressure to which they are subjected, the more prone are they to give off superfluous vapour.

Fleming, then, yielding to an impulse which he could not resist, had done his utmost to attract Minnie's love. When Martin was at Chudlegh, he had been to the studio almost daily. On leaving, he had pressed her hand, but it lay stone-like in his own. He had looked softly into her eyes, but could wake no responsive glance. He had been not only irritated, but perplexed. She was petted by the coterie; she was on the best of terms with its every member, and yet, so far as he could see, betrayed no preference for any. Why, then, did she refuse to accept his homage, and, for aught that she could tell, his love?

When Martin returned, he guessed the "why." He remarked the heightened

colour, the timid eyes, the tremor in her voice. Once more Martin had crossed his path; envy was jaundiced into hate; and hate determined him to persevere.

The big clock in the Town Hall chimed the quarter, the half-hour, the quarter-to, the hour. Then, ten loud strokes, sounded on its mighty bell, boomed in the air; yet Fleming continued motionless in Ralph Nesbitt's chair. The past, the present, the future, held him in their grip; the counsellor stood in need of counsel; Martin's wraith, had it been at his elbow, might well have retorted, "Business requires a clear brain and an undivided attention."

Presently the lobby door was opened, then closed, and Martin entered the office.

"After ten," he exclaimed, pointing to a goodly pile on the table, "and the letters not opened! What have you been dreaming about? Or, stay," noticing the other's pallor, "perhaps you are not well?"

Martin's sudden appearance had almost paralyzed Fleming's energy; but this allusion to his health restored his confidence.

"No; it is not that, Mr. Martin. But I —that is, we—have sustained a great loss. Mr. Nesbitt is—dead."

"Dead!" echoed Martin. "When? How?"

"He had been ailing for some time, you know, sir. He caught a severe cold whilst you were in the South, and that settling upon his lungs must have hastened the end."

"Dead," repeated Martin. "He was sitting in that very chair the week before last."

"Last Tuesday week. I received the news early this morning. But you had better read the letter, sir, yourself."

Martin took the letter, which had been written by the late Mr. Nesbitt's doctor, from Fleming's hand. He had not been

deeply attached to his partner—their natures were too dissimilar for that. And yet he grieved to think that the place would know him no more. He felt that he should miss his presence, his experience, his counsel. If they had sometimes differed, Mr. Nesbitt had been neither peremptory nor stubborn; had been willing to give way to the younger man; and, although prejudiced against the utility of his antecedents as a stepping-stone to business, had not permitted any such prepossession to abate his courtesy.

"You may not be aware of the fact, sir," resumed Fleming; "but Mr. Nesbitt has constituted me his sole executor."

"His sole executor!"

"Yes, sir," continued Fleming, who had regained his self-control. "You cannot be more surprised than I was, Mr. Martin, when he first apprised me of his intention."

"You never hinted at such a thing," interposed the other.

"It was not for me to do that, sir. It was Mr. Nesbitt's secret, not mine. I could only presume that, as a matter of course, he would allude to the subject himself."

"He never did."

"Then possibly, sir, you are still in ignorance as to the conditions of the will?"

"He never gave me the slightest clue."

Fleming sighed. "It is difficult to gauge the motives of another," he said; "but I think, sir, that Mr. Nesbitt ought to have given you some idea as to the manner in which he intended to dispose of his property. His not having done so may create a prejudice in your mind against myself."

"Nonsense, man. You and I have not quarrelled hitherto, nor can I see why we should do so now."

"You are very good, sir—very, and I trust always to deserve your confidence. The will is one which it will be most distasteful to administer."

"In the name of Heaven, what has he done with his money? Left it to the sweepers at the street-crossings, maybe. He could always secure their repentance by the gift of twopence a week."

"Not quite so bad as that, sir, but nearly so. He has bequeathed thirty thousand pounds to various societies, with remainder to myself."

"Bless the man," cried Martin, with a laugh. "He was hard-headed enough when it came to business, but as mad as a March hare in his religious views."

"Excuse me, Mr. Martin," said Fleming gravely; "this is no laughing matter. We must pay thirty thousand pounds out of the business during the next twelve months. A large sum to provide, sir, at so short a notice."

Martin became serious. "I had not thought about that. Can we do it? Or must we introduce fresh capital?"

"I have been debating that very point for more than an hour, sir, and have arrived at the conclusion that to introduce fresh capital might be prejudicial."

"Can it be avoided, Fleming? The withdrawal of so large a sum will seriously reduce our stability—by one-half, in fact."

"Will you permit me to speak frankly, sir?"

"By all means."

"Then, sir, I am of opinion that the introduction of fresh blood might produce complications at a time when disputes as to our policy would be most awkward. A new partner could not immediately grasp the history of the Firm, nor the lessons which it has taught. He would be sure to press theories of his own—a state of affairs to which Fosset Lane is an altogether stranger. People are fond of talking about 'new blood,' Mr. Martin, but forget how dangerous it is to put new wine into old

bottles. And for that matter, you and I are not so very old, sir. I'll warrant that we can steer the ship into port without taking a pilot on board."

"But were we to suffer shipwreck, Fleming, we should vitiate the insurance."

"Ah, Mr. Martin! you were always sharp as needles, sir. But we do not intend to suffer shipwreck. We shall have to be careful for a year or two; after which we can go full speed ahead. With the advantage of your advice, sir, I will undertake to keep clear of rocks."

"And for carrying the ship into still water," said Martin, with a smile, "you will expect an adequate remuneration."

Fleming could not restrain the slight flush which rose to his cheeks.

"No doubt, sir, I should expect some return for the extra work which would be laid upon my shoulders. But I am not ambitious, thank God. I have neither

father, nor mother, nor sister. A trifling and immediate interest would be sufficient to stimulate my exertions—an interest so small, sir, that it could scarcely influence your decision."

Martin had implicit faith in Fleming's honesty. He believed in his capabilities as thoroughly as Ralph Nesbitt had done. But he felt that the matter was too important to be settled then and there. He required time in which to digest the other's proposition before determining on its advisability. Evidently, this was a turning-point in his life, a precipice where one false step would mean destruction, an aspect of the heavens which might have an important influence on his future.

"I must sleep over the matter," he said at last, "and will let you know my decision in the morning. At the same time, and not to keep you in too great suspense, it is right to mention that I fully appreciate

your capabilities, and am disposed to accept your solution of the difficulty."

Fleming knew Martin too well to attempt at that moment to press his claims. He had turned the current in a direction favourable to himself, and was content to leave it so.

"If you will kindly attend to the necessary business of the day," continued Martin, "I will give my legs a stretch and your advice my best consideration. Of course, as sole executor, you will see to all arrangements connected with the funeral."

A long walk had ever been Martin's remedy when in presence of a difficulty. But that morning he did not set forth at once. The night-school and Dorothy had deflected his attention from self to others, and of late he had suspected Minnie Railton to be the victim of some hidden trouble. He had noticed her face to be growing thinner and yet more thin, the colour to

have forsaken it, and her eyes to be brilliant with a feverish lustre. In the first blush of that new-found peace which succeeded to his melancholy, he had become imbued with the well-intentioned idea of returning happiness to souls whence happiness had fled. Such an idea was but the exuberance of his gratitude: the effervescence of a young and sanguine temperament. If utopian, it was honest. If incapable of realization, it was earnest. On his way to the office, he had resolved to watch Minnie more closely, and, if he saw reason to believe that his surmise was correct, had determined to do his utmost for the relief of her anxieties. He thought her to be a pretty, quiet, well-conducted girl, and pitied from his heart her paling, sorrow-struck face. So, upon leaving Fosset Lane, Martin first went to his club, and after lunch made for the studio.

At the sound of his initiated tap, the door

was unbarred, and he entered the "den." Enjoying its smoke-laden atmosphere and sitting upon the empty wine-cases, he found Minnie, Ernest Clegg, George Spencer, and the Globe-trotter. The coterie was smaller than usual; for, Friday being what is known in Camptown as "market day," Tom Spencer and Copeland were still on 'change, and Joseph Fleming was far too busy to put in an appearance.

"Glad to see you, old fellow," cried Ernest. "We wanted a man like you to give us a fillip. Minnie is in low spirits; Spencer morose; and the Globe-trotter can talk of nothing except the decadence of art."

"Rather, the idleness of a certain Ernest Clegg," grumbled Macpherson. "The 'Roman Matron' there," pointing to it with his pipe, "hasna felt the touch o' brush nor palette-knife for six weeks an' mair."

"Nor does Ffrench look as if he were equal to the task of flogging a jaded horse," growled Spencer. "He has a face long enough to give a man 'the blues.'"

Minnie darted a shy glance at Martin, and regarded him anxiously.

"Within the last hour or two," he returned, "I have heard a piece of bad news. Mr. Nesbitt — my partner — died early this morning."

"Then by this time he knows the Unknowable," sneered Spencer.

Macpherson looked at the speaker severely. "It's to be hoped, lad," he cried, "that ye'll ken mair than the Unknowable afore your ain time comes."

"What does it matter, Globe-trotter? The 'Unknowable,' the 'Unknown,' the 'Infinite and Eternal Energy,' the 'Great First Cause'—it is just the same whatever you elect to call it."

"Eh, sir? You, an' the like o' you, are

fine players wi' words. Ye build your ain castles, an' maybe ye'll some day perish beneath their ruins. They've got no sure foundation, lad."

"If anything is sure, Positivism is sure," retorted Spencer. "It feels its way step by step. It is founded upon ascertained phenomena. It rejects a 'know-nothing' creed as incompatible with reason. It is, *beyond all doubt*, the one religion of the future."

"Nae, laddie, that can ne'er be. Ye squabble too much amang yourselves to hoodwink sensible folk. Ye put a 'quasi-' before your adjectives; ye're in doubt as to the value of your substantives; ye ask the world to believe in a vague abstraction which ye no comprehend."

"That is not argument, Globe-trotter. It is mere assertion."

"Hoot, Mr. Spencer! An' what is your ain doctrine but assertion. To satisfy your

ain consciences, ye preach a reverence for the Unknowable, or whatever ye are pleased to call it. Ye assert—ye canna do mair nor that—your fetish to be unknowable, an' exhort men to bend their knees to ye know not what. Hoot, man! The world wants some better faith nor that. Ye wrap little thoughts in long words," continued the Globe-trotter excitedly, "to hide their nakedness. Ye talk of ontology and anthropomorphism, of transparencies an' transcendentalism, an' forget the meaning of the little verb 'to be.' Ye think to hide your bodies, like a foolish ostrich, in the shifting sands of 'ologies' and 'isms.' But, ye canna do that. Ye were born, and ye must die. Ye canna put back the sun, ye canna prevent the morrow. Ye canna control the lightning, nor calm the sea. Ye're bound to follow, though maybe with tears; to submit, in spite o' yourselves, to what ye dinna want to comprehend. But,

I'd forgot," said the old man, lowering his voice. "The short span o' your life has been lived in cities where smoke obscures the sky, an' where the works o' man have trodden rough-shod upon the face o' Nature."

"And yet, Globe-trotter, had I lived alongside some stream in one of your native glens, what facts could it have told me as to the Unknowable? It might have stimulated poetic thought, have appealed to the imagination, but it could have done no more."

"It would have testified, lad, to the small voice which appeals to every man, and which ne'er speaks so loudly as amid the solitudes of Nature. It would have whispered to ye about the littleness of Self, an' of the Love which created both you and it."

"Religion," retorted Spencer, "'is not a thing of star-gazing and staring, but of life and action.' Religion, such as yours, Globe-trotter, is 'outside the sphere of

knowledge, of civilization, of social discipline, of morality, of progress, of happiness. It has no part or parcel in human life. It fills a brief and mysterious chapter in a system of philosophy. Does the Evolutionist commune with the Unknowable in the secret silence of his chamber?'"

"Happier for him, Mr. Spencer, were he to do so."

"Once more, Globe-trotter, you but bring forward assertion as against his deduction."

"Nae, lad. Believing with him in the phenomena of Nature, I believe also in the benefits which a revealed religion has brought to man. To deny the efficacy of Christianity appears to me 'like denying the agency of the sun in the physical world.' It's not less patent than the phenomena of Nature."

George Spencer shrugged his shoulders, and smiled cynically. "It is of no use to

discuss such matters with an old fossil like you," he growled.

"Mayhap, lad, ye find me a reasonably hard nut to crack."

"Where on earth, Globe-trotter," interrupted Ernest, "did you come across those break-jaw words? Not, I take it, among the sheepfolds of Waimate?"

"Nae, Mr. Clegg, nae. In Waimate I learned the rudiments, an', pondering by mysel' on the hillside, laid the foundation. But, I'm fond o' learning, and o' hearing what folks has to say. So I dip at times into the 'Cosmorama.' It's a fine publication, too. It gives a hearing to baith sides, an' leaves people to forgather with their ain opinion."

"And a pretty strong one you seem to have forgathered with," said Martin, laughing.

"None sae bad," returned the other.

As often happens, the conversation had

led into unexpected channels, and had been prolonged beyond the usual hour for leaving Tib Street. It was Friday, too, and the last day on which a night-school was to be held that season, making it impossible for Martin to devote more time on that occasion to Minnie Railton.

But he had seen enough. He had noted more particularly than before the girl's paleness, and the depression which had succeeded to her former gaiety.

"Minnie, you will be here to-morrow?" he said, rising from his wine-case.

The question was not only unexpected, but unusual, and she looked at him inquiringly.

"I suppose so," she returned, with a faint smile. "I am commonly to be found in Tib Street between one and three."

"Then, *au revoir*. Good-bye, you fellows." And, closing the door, Martin hurried down the grimy stair.

CHAPTER IV.

BENT ON CHARITY.

The big clock of the Town Hall had again repeated ten strokes on its mighty bell. The sound wave of the last had ceased to vibrate on the atmosphere, and nothing broke the stillness which reigned in the late Mr. Nesbitt's office save the scratching of Joseph Fleming's pen. Martin had not arrived, and Fleming was on the tiptoe of expectation. In a few moments his fate would be decided—his falsification of the books must be discovered, or he should obtain a respite.

It was barely five minutes past the hour when a step was heard upon the stair, the

lobby-door was opened, and Martin entered the room.

"Good day, sir," said the manager, with all the calmness that he could assume.

"Good day, Fleming," returned the newcomer, throwing himself into a chair. "Hard at work, I see, and somewhat recovered, I trust, from the shock of yesterday."

"Somewhat, Mr. Martin. And work, sir, I take to be the best physician for a mind diseased."

"Not the least doubt of it. Well, I dare say that you would like to know my decision with regard to your proposition of yesterday?"

"Naturally, sir, I feel anxious, not only as to the future of a business with which I have been connected for many years, but as to my own prospects."

"And I could not expect, or even wish it to be otherwise," said Martin. "In the first place, you will be glad to learn that

I have decided not to bring in additional capital, unless at some future time we find such a course to be necessary. Not to do so will, I believe, improve our credit, occasion less talk, and, in the long-run, strengthen our position."

Fleming sat with eyes bent upon the carpet. He was eased of a great burden. Nay, he almost felt as the convict who has been spared the gallows.

"But," continued Martin, "I do not see that I can at once make you a partner. As Mr. Nesbitt's executor, one portion of your duties must, to a certain extent, be antagonistic to the interests of the Firm."

"That can never be, sir."

"And yet, Fleming, it must be so. You will have to withdraw moneys which the Firm would be willing to retain. If, just now, I were to associate you more intimately with myself, busybodies might exclaim that I had a sinister object, that

I had wooed your support, and attempted to minimize the bad effects of Mr. Nesbitt's will. In any case, I should feel such a possibility to be suspended over my head. My position would become intolerable, and I should lose all confidence in myself."

"But, sir——"

"Nay, hear me to the end. What I propose is this: to retain you as manager on your present salary; but, over and above your salary, to give you a bonus of one-fifth of the profits for the next twelve months. The adoption of such a plan will not constitute you a partner in the legal sense of the word. You will still sign by procuration, you will not be responsible for any loss which may accrue, and I shall retain to myself full liberty of action."

Fleming bit his lip. This was not the position that he had hoped to attain. He would still be the other's servant, and in no sense an equal. He could be dismissed

at any moment were his malpractices to be discovered. He must still wear that chain about his neck which, but a moment before, he had thought to have discarded. He could not agree to the plan without a struggle. And yet, the offer, he knew, was both kind and thoughtful.

"What do you say?" continued Martin, surprised at his manager's silence. "I should have thought that you would have jumped at the idea—a good salary, with the chance of a large profit, unaccompanied by any risk."

"Certainly, sir, certainly. But I trusted that the name and style of Nesbitt, Ffrench, and Co. might be altered to that of Ffrench, Fleming, and Co. Your offer is most generous, Mr. Martin, and from a monetary point of view highly satisfactory. Yet status, to a man like myself, would have been more acceptable than mere pecuniary compensation."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Martin, with some irritation. "Should all go well, you will be a partner in twelve months from now, and that ought to satisfy a nature even so sensitive as yours. If you are not prepared to close with the offer, I shall take immediate steps to procure fresh capital."

Martin's determined tone brought Fleming to his true bearings. In an instant the fear of detection outweighed all other considerations.

"I was but speaking frankly, sir," he hastened to explain, "giving utterance to my secret aspirations, as though I had been alone. Of course, Mr. Martin, I can have no hesitation. You may consider the matter, sir, to be settled."

"I'm glad to hear it," retorted Martin shortly. For, born to comparative affluence and nurtured in a country-side, he did not understand that craving after social

distinction to be found among the class to which Fleming belonged.

"By-the-by," he remarked presently, and as they were about to leave the office, "have you noticed how ill Minnie Railton looks? I have been struck by her appearance for some weeks. She is quite losing her pretty colour."

Fleming's hand trembled, as he placed some documents in their proper drawer. "No, sir," he stammered, "I cannot say that I have noticed any very great change."

Martin laughed. "I don't think that you are much of a ladies' man, Fleming. The office is your only wife, the business your one child. Anyhow," he went on, "this afternoon I shall try to find out what is amiss. I shall follow her to her lodgings, or to wherever it is that she lives."

"Better not do that, Mr. Martin," interrupted Fleming, a sickly, ashen hue

overspreading his face. "It might be dangerous."

"Dangerous!" cried the other. "Why?"

"Well, sir, we do not exactly know who she is, where she comes from, or how she lives. She's a sort of mystery, sir, and a girl whom, in my opinion, a gentleman like yourself ought to avoid."

Martin's chivalrous nature revolted against the supposition. "Drat it, man," he exclaimed, "I'd stake my life on that girl's honesty."

"You know best, sir, of course. But I thought it right, as you were so good as to admit me into your confidence, to give you my opinion."

"Tut, tut, Fleming. Your advice would have been sound had it applied to a common model. But Minnie is not a common model. She is a sweet girl, and, as I suspect, friendless. I mentioned the matter, because, when I follow her from the 'den,' I want you

to keep the others in hand until she and I have got well away."

"I shall have no time to go to the studio this afternoon, Mr. Martin. I must attend to Mr. Nesbitt's affairs."

"Then you cannot assist me. Well, good day, Fleming. Of course you will not mention what I have said about Minnie to the others. She might not like it, poor girl."

"Certainly not, sir."

Martin hurried to his club. In fact, he repeated the programme of the previous day with but one exception. Then, he had carried his umbrella neatly folded under his arm; now, he held it open and well to the front, as a protection against the driving rain. The weather was so stormy that he was glad to reach the club and to settle himself in his accustomed corner. Even had he not been bent upon a charitable action, the prospect out of doors offered no

inducement to return home earlier than could be avoided. And, as he lounged in the cozy chair and read his paper by the fire, he half made up his mind that he would, after his interview with Minnie, first dine and then sleep in quarters so replete with comfort. Meantime, he ordered a glass of sherry and a plate of wine biscuits. These were soon standing at his elbow, and the man who had brought them began unnecessarily to stir the already blazing coals. Unnecessarily perhaps, yet the proceeding carried with it the conviction of a so nice attention as to determine Martin's thus far halting purpose.

"Can I have a bed to-night?" he inquired.

"Certainly, sir."

"Then put my name down for one. And, waiter, I shall dine in the house at seven."

Which matters having been adjusted, Martin sipped his sherry, consumed the

biscuits, and read the paper until the hands of the clock upon the mantelpiece pointed to the hour of two. Then, with a sigh, he rose from the cozy chair, and, resuming his dank coat and umbrella, sallied into the wet streets.

It was later than usual when he reached the "den." All the members of the coterie had arrived except the Globe-trotter and Fleming. On such a day the Globe-trotter, no doubt, preferred his "ain hearth-stane" to the slushy pavement and hurtling rain, and Fleming had declared his time to be fully taken up by Mr. Nesbitt's affairs. Martin rejoiced at the Globe-trotter's absence, which rendered it more likely that he should be able to leave the studio without a companion, and be free to follow Minnie without interruption. It was impossible that he could question her there, under the eyes of the coterie; nor for her sake could he entertain the idea of doing so

in the open street. No. The plan which he had formed appeared the only one practicable, and to that he was determined to adhere.

Lighting his pipe, he sat down in his usual corner—that is, against one jamb of the mantelpiece and opposite to Minnie. The conspirator is ever suspicious, and Martin, being for the nonce an arch-conspirator, did not escape the spectre which haunts those of like occupation with himself. He fancied that the coterie regarded him more curiously than was its wont, and fathomed something of his purpose. So he took a full share in the conversation in order to divert its attention from the trail, glancing but fleetingly at the girl from time to time.

So far as Minnie was concerned, his diplomacy proved unsuccessful. Love is a sorcerer—one who sharpens to the keenest edge which they are capable of receiving

the perceptions of those over whom he has cast a spell. Under his influence, a chance word, the vibration of a tone, an almost unnoticeable glance, are one and all sufficient to indicate the emotions which dominate the loved one's heart. Minnie knew, as certainly as if she had been told, that Martin was occupied with herself; that she was in his thoughts; and that his thoughts were kindly. A thrill of happiness was the result. Her blue eyes lost their dull feverish lustre, and she dropped them timidly to the ground.

But fond musings like hers must have an end. After about an hour, Martin left the studio and made his way down the grimy stair. He had already determined what to do. He would conceal himself in one of the entries which gave access to the many chambers across the street, and wait there until Minnie appeared. The rain formed an excuse for loitering, and it being

Saturday afternoon, Tib Street was almost deserted; nor, on so bad a day, was there much likelihood of his stumbling against an acquaintance. He selected a convenient doorway, and, hastening over the road, ensconced himself in its shadow.

He had not long to wait. Deprived of his presence, the studio offered no attraction to Minnie Railton. She became imbued with a desire for solitude. The conversation of the coterie appeared insipid, and she longed to escape from an incessant clatter which jarred upon her nerves. So, she too left.

Martin was quick to notice the trim little figure as it stepped on to the deserted pavement, but he did not emerge from his concealment until the girl had turned into the Canonsgate—that long, straight, busy street which, passing through the heart of Camptown, leads into the far-distant country. Then he followed rapidly, lest perchance

he might lose her in the throng—for were the weather wet or fine the Canonsgate was always crowded. But no. He recognized her at once, many yards ahead; her dark ulster and neat umbrella conspicuous amid the swarm of artisans and factory-girls which filled the footway. On she went through the steaming, draggled mass, looking neither to the right nor left—onward, always onward.

The atmosphere was muggy and miserably exhaustive. The heavy rain had given place to a thick drizzle, which brought down the smoke, and to ward off which an umbrella was well nigh useless. The Canonsgate, dreary at the best of times, looked doubly so that afternoon. The clouds were low and threatening. The windows stood thick with running damp. The coloured bottles at the chemists were shorn of half their splendour; the golden balls which betrayed the pawnbroker were

tarnished; the sugars exhibited by the grocer were clammy and seemed of doubtful quality, the raisins mildewed, the currants caked and mouldy.

After a time they passed all these, and entered a quarter where the vendors of old clothes disputed the supremacy with low lodging-houses and frequent beer-shops. This was a ghastly, squalid region, peopled with half-famished women, gutter-children, and loafing men; with those who preferred idleness to exertion, thieving to honesty, dirt to cleanliness.

On through the press went Minnie, her dark ulster, Martin's beacon; her neat umbrella towering above the shawl-protected heads of the women, and visible amid the slouched hats and reeking caps of the men. But soon, and in their turn, the vendors of old clothes, the lodging and beer houses, were left behind, and the girl, passing beneath the arch of a railway-bridge,

entered a quieter, less frequented district, where private dwellings and respectability began to assert their prerogative.

The chase assumed a new interest. Martin felt that he was running the quarry to its lair, yet feared lest it might turn and distinguish who it was that pursued. The road was wider, the wayfarers were few, the danger of detection greatly increased. He lowered his umbrella, the better to conceal his face and body; nor raised it except at distant intervals, and then but to make sure that he had not overrun the mark.

Had he but known it, there existed no cause for fear. Minnie Railton was preoccupied, and pursued her way mechanically. She had taken no heed of the dim shops, the gutter-children, the miserable women, and dingy lodging-houses. She had walked as in a dream, and her dream had been sweet, though not untinged with bitterness. When she left Tib Street, the sweet had

predominated; now that she was nearing home, the bitterness had commenced to assert itself. Each step, she thought, was taking her further and further from Martin; was bringing her nearer and nearer to the drear lodging which that day she almost loathed. She had no idea that any one could be on her track. She had traversed the road so often—nay, almost daily—and had never found that to happen.

In a few minutes after passing beneath the bridge, she turned up a street to the left—a street, long and straight, looking wider than it was by reason of the low, two-storied houses which lined its either side. Not a foot-passenger could be descried in the length of its weary vista. A butcher's cart was standing on the left, a solitary huckster was crying his wares some hundred yards beyond the cart. Each house was the counterpart of its neighbour. Each had a bow-window; each had its slip of garden,

protected from the road by a low stone wall and varnished gate. The street presented nothing but a succession of bow-windows, stone walls, and varnished gates. Its uniformity heightened its monotony. It might give the idea of respectability, but its very respectability grew wearisome.

Minnie pursued her way for about five hundred yards before she paused. Then she opened one of the varnished gates and stood before one of the countless doors. Martin could see that she was searching for a latch-key, and hastened to decrease the distance between them. She had entered the house, and was about to close the door when he gained its threshold. He stood for a moment, his coat dripping and wet, before she could realize that it was actually Martin and not a conception of her disordered fancy. When she had assured herself that there could be no mistake, she uttered a low, timid cry—half wail, half-joyful sob.

"Mr. Ffrench," she murmured. "Oh, why have you followed me like this?"

"Because I want to speak to you, Minnie; because I could not do so at the studio."

"You had better leave me—indeed, you had better leave me."

"Not until I have said what I came to say—not until I have found out what I want to know." And Martin, crossing the threshold, entered the narrow passage. Then, having taken off his dripping overcoat, and hung it on a peg, he closed the door.

"Now, Minnie, show me into your sitting-room," he cried, in high glee at the success of his undertaking; "then disrobe yourself of that damp ulster, and let us have a comfortable chat."

Minnie, trembling, yet—in spite of her just now expostulations—glad, opened a door which gave into the dark passage, and ushered Martin into her small bow-windowed

parlour. It was similar to a thousand and one parlours, its brothers and sisters, which were dotted up and down the quiet second-class streets of Camptown. The chiffonier *vis-à-vis* to the window, the horsehair covered sofa facing the mantelpiece, the round table covered with its cloth of make-believe tapestry, the muslin curtains, the mirror above the fireplace, the one armchair lording it over some half-dozen of its lesser brethren, the large-patterned flower-strewn carpet—all were there. The room presented no similitude of comfort, nothing which gave evidence of a useful life, nothing which could appeal to the intellect save, might be, the greasy, well-thumbed, yellow-backed novel borrowed from the nearest library.

Martin turned to regard the prospect without. Everywhere bow-windows, muslin curtains, polished knockers, grained doors, low stone walls, and varnished gates.

Then, pivoting on his heel, he noticed that Minnie was in the room. She had doffed both her waterproof and hat, and stood in her dark merino dress at the farther side of the table, one hand resting upon the cloth, her eyes bent downward, her colour heightened, her fair hair ruffled by the wind.

"Minnie!" he said. And at the sound of his voice she looked at him wistfully.

"Minnie, I came because you are unhappy; because you have a trouble that I may perhaps alleviate."

Once more she raised her face to his—this time not only wistfully, but shyly.

"I have come," he continued, "because I want to be your friend; because I cannot bear to see you suffer as you have lately done."

The blue eyes stood full with tears, the pretty head sunk low upon the breast, the trembling hand which rested on the table

could scarce support the emotioned frame. If Martin had been woman, and not man, he must have guessed the truth.

"Tell me," he went on kindly. "What is it that grieves you?"

How could she tell him? How could she say, "I love you, Martin. You, and you alone, are the cause of my grief. If I felt sure of your love, the colour would return, the past would be forgotten, all things would be tinted by a golden light."

Oh, why had he come? Why had he troubled that short hour which she had thought to find so happy? Then came rushing upon her soul in heaped confusion a sense of isolation, a conviction of her woe, the taint of despair—those feelings which comprise "the sum-total of wretchedness to man. To be cut off, to be left solitary; to have a world alien, not your world; all a hostile camp for you; not a home at all;" —that is to be miserable.

But Martin knew naught of this. Nay, he misconstrued her silence.

"Minnie, how do you live?" he inquired in a sterner tone.

"How do I live?" she repeated drearily.

"Exactly. How do you live?"

The words fell upon a dull ear. The disposal of her time was of little moment were she to be deprived of all that made life dear. And it was this which she dreaded; this the fear which chilled her heart, and prevented her from understanding the drift of his words; this it was which bound her tongue.

A stern look settled upon Martin's face.

"You cannot—you have not dared——" he cried.

Minnie was startled by the harshness of his voice. She raised her face to his, and understood. A deep blush crimsoned her brow, and cheek, and neck.

"Oh, not that! Do not think that!" she exclaimed piteously.

A softness stole into Martin's eyes, and a sigh of relief escaped his lips. "Forgive me," he murmured. "I ought to have felt sure that it could not be."

But the stab was beyond recall. The girl sank upon her knees beside the table, and veiled her stricken face. That the blow should have been delivered by him—her loved one! And if by him, generous and thoughtful as he had always been, why not by all? This was indeed the depth of isolation, the height of misery. The one bright dream in her sad life had fled for ever. Had his breast contained but one spark of the love which she had dared to hope, he could not have inflicted so cruel a wound. She knew at length that her love had been vain, that thenceforth her path would be more lonesome than before. Up to that moment, hope, however weak and

fitful it might be, had cheered her way; now, it was succeeded by an immensity of despair.

"Forgive me," repeated Martin.

The girl heard him not. Tears were trickling through her fingers, and a heaving breast witnessed to her emotion.

Martin was perplexed, but determined. He crossed the room, and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Nay, Minnie, but you must forgive me," he said in a kind tone.

"I do, Mr. Ffrench, indeed I do. But go now—please go."

"Not until I know what troubles you. I cannot leave you so sad as this." Then he raised her, and placed her in the arm-chair.

"Is it money?" he said soothingly.

Alas, it was not that; nor could she tell him what it was. She saw that he was determined to have a reason, and possibly the lack of money would be as good a cloak

to her disappointed love as any excuse that she could frame.

"Yes," she murmured.

Martin thought that he was making a little headway. "If that be all, Minnie, dry your tears. That can be easily remedied. I can let you have as much as you are likely to want for the present, and until we can find you something to do."

This solution of the difficulty did not appear to bring the relief which he expected.

"I'll tell you what it is," he went on. "You ought to find some regular employment. It's not a good thing for a girl like you to be tramping to that studio every day."

"I do not think that it is," she acquiesced.

"And you return to this infernal hole, and, I'll be bound to say, mope by yourself all the evening."

"Yes," returned the girl faintly.

"Or perhaps read one of these yellow-

backed novels," pointing to that upon the table, "which reduces the sun to a blaze of Bengal fire, and converts the whole duty of man into a game of skittles."

Minnie sighed. Only last night she had been comparing her fortunes to that of its heroine, confounding Martin with its hero, and dreaming of what could never be.

Poor Minnie. Her education had been vague and purposeless. Her religious instincts had been left to develop as best they might. Her world had been very limited, her practical acquaintance with it almost nil, her aspirations concerning it impossible. She had dreamed, not worked; had taken life as it came, without any sense of the responsibilities which it entails.

"This will never do," continued the young philanthropist. "Have you no friends? None at all?"

"Not one. My mother died when I was a child. My father, a doctor, died three

years ago, leaving me barely enough on which to live. I could not remain in the old village—to be poor where I had been well-to-do. And so, I came to Camptown."

"Poor child!" said Martin; "friendless and an orphan."

He paced the room, after his fashion when deeply stirred; whilst Minnie watched him timidly. She had wished him to be gone, and yet it was a mournful consolation to feel that he was there, to have him all this long time to herself, to know that she was in his thoughts and that he was interesting himself about her future. She would be guided by him entirely. She would trust herself to him implicitly. To do that was the one proof which she could give of the deep, absorbing love which held her bound.

Martin continued his walk for some minutes before he spoke again. From time to time he cast a glance towards her. He

marked the wistfulness of her eyes, the sadness of her mouth. The want of money could not make her look like that. Then, had she not said that her father left her sufficient on which to live? And, although Martin was by no means vain, he guessed, or fancied that he guessed, so much of the truth as he cared to know. From which it came that when he spoke again there was something very gentle in his tone.

"Minnie," he said thoughtfully, "when quite a boy, I fell in love with a girl who was twelve months younger than myself. I loved her for years, and thought that she was mine. Last Christmas I asked her to be my wife. Then, and only then, I found that she had accepted another. I thought that happiness had fled for ever. I steeped myself in work to banish care, yet in vain. Presently came a sweet sister whose bright example taught me how it was that I wrought to no purpose. I had worked for

self and not for others. I had forgotten duty. She told me what to do, and by following her advice I have at least refound some measure of the peace which seemed to have been lost."

Minnie listened with breathless interest. Then, he too had suffered, and from the same cause as herself. The knowledge that it was so roused her compassion, and deflected her attention from her own heart's misery. Nor, with a girl of her loving nature, could it have been otherwise. The Enthusiasm of Humanity "is handed on like the torch, from runner to runner, in the race of life." It flows as from a fountain; it is committed by every generation to that which follows; it lightens the burden of each sorrow-stricken mortal brought into contact with another similarly affected.

And her woman's nature rendered Minnie more quick-witted than Martin had been. She gathered from his voice and manner

that the loss of his first love was not irreparable.

"That story of my disappointment," he continued, "I have told to none save to you and Dorothy."

"Dorothy—Dorothy," repeated Minnie, dwelling long and sadly upon the word. "What a pretty name."

"To Miss Grierson, I ought to have said," continued Martin, with a blush. "And I have mentioned it now, in order that you may see your way more clearly, in order that you also may forget self in others."

"What can I do?" exclaimed the poor girl despairingly. "I am not so clever or so well educated as you, Mr. Ffrench."

"Your father was a doctor; could not you become a nurse? Think of the suffering that you might ease; think of the nobleness of such a work, of the care for others which it engenders."

Minnie could not comprehend all that his words conveyed, but she knew that when he left the house the loneliness of her position would be greater than she could endure; that she could not dream on as before; that her hope, faint though it had been, was shattered beyond repair.

"I will become a nurse, if *you* wish it," she whispered, and dwelling upon the "you."

"Then, we will consider the matter to be settled," cried Martin, greatly relieved by what he considered a so happy termination to the interview. "I will take the necessary steps, and call again in a day or two. And, Minnie, you will not go to the studio any more?"

The girl winced. "I shall not go there again," she whispered.

"Better not," said Martin. "Nor do I think that it does any of us much good. We waste a precious lot of time there that might be better employed. If they ask

any questions, I shall tell the fellows that you are better engaged elsewhere. Good night, Minnie," he continued, taking her hand. "You are sure to see me again in a couple of days, at furthest."

She gave him one last, hungry look, and then, sinking back into the chair, covered her face as though to exclude the void created by his absence.

Martin made his way to the club, and once more sat before the comfort-bearing fire. He trusted that he had done no harm. He believed, on the contrary, that he had done some good. And yet, Minnie's wistful eyes haunted his reflections. That last hungry glance of hers had been so sad, so full of woe. Could it be possible that she loved him, and that through him had come her trouble? "If so, poor Minnie," he murmured, "I can feel for her more deeply, in that I too have suffered."

CHAPTER V.

A BAFFLED CUPID.

Minnie was not to be left for any long time to the loneness of her despair. That afternoon, she was fated to receive another visitor.

When Martin quitted the office, Fleming threw himself into Mr. Nesbitt's arm-chair. The parting words dropped by the former had stirred to its very depths the jealousy which day by day had seized him with a tighter grasp. His usually calm brain was harried by the tumult of his passion. His mental vision was concentrated irresistibly upon a vivid picture of its own imagination—upon Martin, the tender and

earnest comforter; upon Minnie, gentle-eyed and responsive. To him, such a picture was maddening. To him, a regard like that which Martin had just now betrayed was but the first stepping-stone to love, to a love which would be met halfway, and which, if once excited, must render hopeless his own success.

And could Martin, alone and face to face with Minnie, resist her mute pleadings and evident predilection? Impossible. He must perceive that her heart was his, and that she was no longer mistress of herself. If so, would not his generous nature, his compassion towards suffering in its every shape, induce him to pursue a path which erstwhile he had not visioned? It was natural to think so; it would be but what he himself would have done had he been in Martin's place. And, if he reckoned the other's character after his own similitude, he did nothing more than common.

For, whilst the pure man deems his neighbour to be pure, the unclean within imputes to his fellow a like uncleanness. Fleming, then, sat in Mr. Nesbitt's chair, a prey to the jealous phantasies which disturbed his peace.

The man was his own god. Religion, faith, a well-ordered submission, were to him unknown quantities. The calm which these could have brought was for him impossible. He was possessed by that Jacobinical notion which asserts life to be but the means to a physical end. For many a year he had lived for self, and now that he was confronted with something which was antithetical to self, he found no resting-place for his storm-tossed spirit. His life had been one calculated to harden the tenderer fibres of his nature. He had neither mother, nor wife, nor sister. He was cut off from those feminine influences which are "the most certain softeners of

a man's moral skin and sweeteners of his blood." What of them he might once have enjoyed had died with his boyhood, and now their memory but rarely visited him, even in his dreams. When he was a student at Bishop Oldham's Grammar School, they had already become misty, intangible unrealities; in later times, they had disappeared, and, possibly, for ever. To him, the story of Cleobis and Biton would have appealed in vain; he could not have comprehended their filial affection or the fair moral to be deduced from their happy death. He could have better understood the reckless spirit of Amphiaraus, fighting against destiny, until the earth swallowed him together with his chariot. That was more in accord with his present temper. To dare the world, to make all things subservient to his will—these were the objects which lined the path along which were directed his fast-treading feet.

Nor did he foresee that he was but compelling to himself that inexorable destiny which awaits the stubborn; that, by his perversity, he was paving the way for some sudden and possibly imminent act which would rank him among the altogether bad; that he was surely tending towards what is evil, and ere long would be powerless to stem the tide which carried him, all unconscious, on its ebbing wave.

That such might be the case did not for one moment mingle with his thoughts. Reason had fled, or, at least, was for the time suspended. In its place had entered a fierce, implacable spirit—the spirit of jealousy and malice—which absorbed his being, driving therefrom what was human, and reducing it below the level of a beast.

He would liked to have seen his supposed rival dragged through the mire, his conscience defaced, his manhood sullied, in order to triumph over his degradation.

Fleming, then, influenced by his corroding thoughts, forgot Ralph Nesbitt's affairs, and busied himself with the vivid, torturing picture which he had conjured. And the more he did so, the more unendurable did it appear. At last, he could sit no longer brooding in his lonely chair. He must ascertain the result of Martin's interview with Minnie. He, too, must visit her, and attempt to supplant his would-be supplanter. Even now, all might not be lost. It was improbable that Martin would be induced to declare his love at a first interview. Ere doing so he must endure many a tussle with his conscience. He would not stoop to wrong on the occasion of his first slight skirmish with temptation. Much as Fleming hated, he knew him to be made of stuff too stern for that. And yet—"*facilis descensus Averni.*" He ought not to rely too blindly upon the other's rectitude.

Tossed, now hither now thither, by the

whirlwind of his passion, Fleming left the office. Upon entering the Canonsgate he looked at his watch and found that it was barely half-past two. Mechanically, and as by the force of habit, he turned his steps in the direction of Tib Street, and had ascended the first flight of stairs which led to the studio before he became conscious of where he was or of what he was about to do. Then he remembered to have told Martin that he could not join the coterie that afternoon, and, moreover, it would be inimical to his plans were his presence to be discovered. So, turning upon his heel, he descended the stairs and slowly paced the street. But only for a few moments. At any time now Minnie might appear, and he must find some better point of observation. Crossing the road, he, like Martin a short while afterwards, ensconced himself in an entry and awaited the result.

The big clock in the Town Hall struck the three-quarters, and yet she came not. He noted the irrecoverable minutes as recorded upon the dial of his watch, each one to his impatient spirit appearing to be ten. Soon he was haunted by a suspicion that he might be too late; that those for whom he waited had left the den.

Ten minutes to the hour, and yet no signs of Minnie. On ordinary occasions he was both cool and calculating. Most times he could bend others to his will and mould them in his firm grip. But, to-day, all that seemed changed. He it was who had become plastic, the waif tossed to and fro upon the sea of passion.

Five minutes to the hour—then the hour. And again the laggard minutes followed each other in slow succession, unmindful of his anxiety, unquickened by his hasty pulse. And Martin, all this long and, to the watcher, distressful time, might be with

Minnie, looking into her blue eyes, drinking from out their clear depths

> "the very ecstasy of love,
> Whose violent property fordoes itself
> And leads the will to desperate undertakings."

Fleming stamped his foot upon the hard bare flags which floored the lobby. Was this uncertainty to endure for ever? It was already five minutes past the hour—five weary minutes, each one more dallying than the last. Eight—nine—ten, and nothing had happened to reward his vigilance. He was inclined to take the bull by the horns, emerge from his concealment, and boldly join the coterie. But he would endure—yet another five minutes, and they being spent, he felt that he could wait there no longer, impatient and uncertain.

Eleven—twelve minutes. Then Martin emerged from the opposite doorway, and hastening across the road, ensconced himself in an entry next to the one in which

his manager lay *perdu*. It was a trying moment to Fleming, and for an instant he feared that he could not escape detection. Martin seemed to hesitate as to which entry he should select. But, if so, it was not for long.

That Martin had concealed himself was proof conclusive that Minnie was in the studio, that he should be able to track their united steps, and ascertain the outcome of the interview so soon to follow. He could tarry more patiently now that he stood on surer ground, and, although not determined as to the exact action that he should take, he at least saw his way more clearly. And, as he did so, returned the greater portion of his self-confidence.

A few minutes later Minnie went down the street. Fleming eyed Martin as he followed, gazing bitterly at his retreating figure until it was lost amid the crowd which thronged the Canonsgate. Then

he hastened to dog their path. Like Minnie, he noted neither the drizzling rain nor the dim shops. He took no heed of the gutter-children or draggled women, of the dingy lodging-houses or their tattered occupants. He, too, was preoccupied, and walked as in a dream. But his dream was altogether bitter. He kept his gaze fully fixed on Martin. He marked his every movement. He noted how his umbrella was carried more to the front as they entered the less-frequented highway, and divined the wherefore. He noted how it was occasionally raised to catch a glimpse of the chase and the discreet distance which was maintained by the pursuer. He neared them as they turned into the long, straight street where Minnie dwelt, but paid no attention to its loneliness, to its bow-windows and varnished gates. His mind was intent upon the drama to be played so soon, and in which he could take no part.

Could take no part! His jealousy was heightened by the thought, and yet he dared not present himself thus soon. Reason had so far recovered her throne as to make it clear that any interference just then would be worse than useless.

He noted how Minnie searched for her latch-key, and how Martin, when the door was opened, crossed its threshold. When both had disappeared, he, too, entered through the gate and deciphered the number which distinguished the house from those on its either side. He did this quickly and noiselessly, and had repassed the gate before Martin began to survey the untempting prospect which lay without.

The drizzling rain still fell; and Fleming who had been walking without umbrella—the collar of his coat turned up, and the brim of his felt hat turned down to conceal his features—not only felt but was most miserably wet. It would be impossible to

remain for perhaps an hour in the open street. Apart from the risk of detection which he must incur, the driving mist would render such a course to be far from agreeable. He had noticed an inn, standing at one corner of the road, the fire in whose parlour had cast a ruddy, cozy gleam athwart the pavement. He would make for that. From its window he could watch for Martin's return, and protected by its genial warmth could better endure the lagging minutes which were doomed to follow.

Avoiding the main door and public bar, he passed through a side entrance into the parlour. He ordered a stiff glass of brandy and water, hot, which he swallowed eagerly. The stimulant revived his chilled frame and sent the blood dancing through his just now sluggish veins. He had tasted nothing since an early breakfast, and the intensity of his passions had exhausted his vital force. But now he felt invigorated, once more

capable of action. His brain was excited and overwrought, but he knew it not. To him it appeared healthy, under control, and fit for work. His pulses beat merrily. Success looked more probable than it had done an hour before.

He would order another glass. It would do him good; it would enforce this new-found confidence. That swallowed, he went to the window, peering with dilated eyes over its red blind into the reeking street. But his patience was soon exhausted. How much longer was he to be cooped within that narrow room? How much longer did Martin propose to remain with Minnie—basking in her smiles, returning her tender glances, offering with a too-bounteous hand his dangerous comfort? Why had the fellow stepped in thus to deflect a love which otherwise had been his own?

But Martin should not find that his triumph, if he were to triumph, had cost

him nothing. The business in Fosset Lane was in a critical position—the books had been tampered with after a wholesale fashion; it would be easy for him, as manager, to mine and countermine until the affairs of the Firm had become irretrievably involved. If the other were to triumph, he determined to be avenged, and at that moment and to his distorted spirit vengeance appeared almost as welcome as love's success.

He had been the sole occupant of the parlour for more than an hour, at times pacing its floor as does the caged tiger its narrow prison, at times desisting from his impatient walk to stand before the window, —his pale face glued to its moisture-laden panes. He had been there so long that he began once more to fancy that the object of his watch had passed unseen, or returned by some other road. But no. His fortune had not played the wanton. At last he saw

Martin as in the deepening twilight he strode along the pavement opposite—a smile upon his face, his tread the lighter by reason of the good deed which he thought to have compassed. Fleming smiled bitterly to see him thus. Far better that his step had halted, and that his head had been bowed upon his chest. A more dejected mien would have been a better prelude to his own success.

He remained at the window for some time after Martin vanished round the corner of the street. The false courage imbibed with the brandy had been slowly dwindling, and now, determined as he had been a short while since, he lingered instead of setting forth. He became doubtful as to what his reception might be; as to whether it would be judicious to press his suit just then; as to whether he had not better delay the interview which he purposed until possessed of something more tangible on which to work.

"But, bah!" he exclaimed. "What does it matter? Delay, be it long or short, cannot affect the past. It is the present and future with which I have to deal, and they, thank God, are mine."

Then, going to the table, he rang a hand-bell which stood upon it.

"Another brandy and water," he demanded fiercely of the barman. "And see that the water boils."

What could it matter, that one glass more? The others had done him so much good, and he wanted just one more fillip to quicken that confidence in himself which he felt to be abating.

At last he left the inn, and sought the house to which he had tracked Minnie. It was almost dark. The street-lamps rendered the prevailing gloom but more visible, twinkling as dulled stars in the murky atmosphere, their reflection caught at distant intervals by the running gutters. The

air was fog-laden, dank with a cold which penetrated to the very marrow. Hampered by the darkness, Fleming passed through two or three gates and examined two or three numbers before his search was rewarded with success. But soon the loud sound given off by the knocker, as he rapped it determinedly against its stud, broke the sad quiet, and even compelled a responsive echo from the seemingly dead bow-windows across the road.

The noise startled Minnie from her dream. Since Martin left the room she had remained without motion—her face covered by both hands, her figure bent upon itself, and cowering in the recesses of the arm-chair in which he had placed her. It could not be Martin who had returned. An idea that it might so chance did not for an instant arrest her thought. The knock betrayed the touch of an impatient, fiery nature, far different to his. She but

wondered who it could be that claimed admittance so peremptorily, and who sought her at an hour so unusual.

Her doubts were speedily set at rest. The door was thrown open, and Fleming stood before her. She had never liked him. Any influence which he had exerted over her consciousness had been repellent. She knew that he sought to attract her to himself, possibly to invoke her love. But the more he had done so, the more she had resisted his attempt, shrinking within herself as a tender flower closes its petals at the approach of night.

And now he stood without a word, the traces of his long-indulged, tumultuous passion evident upon his face. She became agitated, then frightened. Nay, the fear engendered by his presence compelled her to be the first to speak.

"Mr. Fleming! By what right have you dared to intrude, unasked?"

It was but the cold reception which he had pictured, and an angry rejoinder rushed to his lips. But he drove it backwards, and strove to make his words gentle and his tone sad.

"Can you not guess, Minnie?"

"No," she returned coldly.

"Have you known me so long and not perceived my feelings? Has not my love been manifest—my devotion unmistakable?"

Minnie shuddered, despite his honeyed words.

"Yes, Minnie. I love you devotedly, ardently. I have done so for months. I have struggled in vain to resist the spell which has enthralled my life. I am no longer master of myself, nor can I restrain my words. Oh, Minnie, you must—you shall be mine. You were created to save me from myself. You alone can calm the tempestuous love excited by your beauty."

She was more than ever frightened now.

His words came swiftly. His eyes flashed with a baneful light. His self-restraint had fled. He was but a creature of the storm which raged within; which drove consequences before its fury; which blinded him to aught save the completion of his will.

"Let us fly, Minnie," he continued in his exitement. "Let us fly to where trouble cannot overtake us. Let us forget all that has combined to disunite us—the studio and the fools who meet there, who care no more for us than we will care for them. We both are orphaned, Minnie; with none to divide our hearts. We both are friendless, unmated, and yet the wide world might be our pleasure-ground, and we masters of our fate. Let us fly—for, why should we not? What is there to defer for an hour the happiness which will respond to our call? What tie more binding can we require than the consciousness that our pulses throb in unison?"

His impetuosity had taken her by surprise, nor could she at once find words to express her loathing. In the excitement to which he had been stirred, Fleming interpreted this hesitation as the prelude to consent. The picture which his ardent feelings had created was so vivid that he felt it to be reality. It had become so part and parcel of his being that he dared not risk its fulfilment by the neglect of any argument which it was possible to urge. Besides, what could it matter? If they were to fly, if for her sake he must relinquish his position in Fosset Lane, why permit any minor consideration to imperil the success which her hesitation would seem to put within his grasp? So far as he was concerned, the conditions under which they fled were of no essential consequence. If she preferred wedlock to a less stringent tie, by all means let it be so. Women, he knew, were sometimes

scrupulous in this respect, and possibly she might be of those who entertained such scruples.

"To me, Minnie," he continued, "no tie could be more binding than that of our mingled loves. To me no tie could be so sweet. But, if you wish it to be otherwise, let us make for some sequestered village, there to publish our banns, and to stand before the altar. I can keep you in plenty, and, above all, have a bold spirit, able, with you for its companion, to dare the world. Oh, Minnie, speak! Tell me that your heart is as mine—that our lives are to be as one!"

Step by step he had drawn nearer to her chair, and now, falling upon his knees, he seized her cold hand. The contact was more than she could endure. Springing to her feet, she freed herself from his grasp, and, darting round the table, placed it between herself and him.

"Begone," she cried; "and never dare to enter this house again."

He rose, baffled and confounded. It was, then, as he had fancied, and Martin had supplanted him. The thought had the bitterness of gall and the nauseousness of wormwood. He suffered from a terrible revulsion—his love was turned to hate, the picture which he thought to realize had proved elusive, and in its stead presented itself the demon of malice and revenge. The change was sudden, complete, and masterful. It came tempered by no gradations, untinctured by a single gleam of pity.

"I warrant me," he sneered, "that you did not attempt to dismiss Ffrench, when he was here just now, after so unceremonious a fashion. Not you. You looked into his face with those blue eyes, smiled at him with that false smile, and strove with all the art of which you were possessed

to keep him dallying at your side. Else, why was he here so long?"

Minnie glanced at him defiantly. She was by nature yielding, sweet, and winsome. But, when fairly roused, she could display a bold front.

"Else, why was he here so long?" he repeated viciously. "But I need not ask, for any dolt could solve so plain a riddle. You love him. You have sold yourself to him, both soul and body. You would cringe at his feet if only he would permit you, to do for him what you have refused to do for me."

The girl's lips twitched convulsively, and an unwonted fire stirred her blue eyes to their very depths.

"But he has no thoughts of marriage," continued the other passionately. "You will be his light-o'-love, a toy to be dismissed at pleasure, a thing soon to be draggled in the gutter." And he uttered a scornful laugh.

"If you are man," she cried, "and not a fiend—begone. Your words are powerless to affect my life. Thank God, I am in better hands than yours."

"In those of Ffrench, I presume. But listen—for you shall have one more chance. I can make or mar your darling's future. You may not love me—nay, I will concede that what you feel towards myself is hate rather than love. That you love Ffrench—will always love him. And yet, pause before you make a final choice. Fly with me, and your darling shall be safe. In that case, I will work for him—nay, slave to prop his tottering fortunes. And you—you will have been his preserver. In your self-renunciation he will find a happiness which, but for you, can never be his. Think, then, before you scorn my offer. For, if you do, I swear remorselessly to crush the fellow beneath my heel."

Minnie had no means of gauging her

tempter's power. But he had shown himself vindictive and unscrupulous—impelled, too, by the lowest type of passion. It might be that he could perform some part of what he threatened. But to fly with him, to unite her lot with his—the thought was unendurable. Would Martin have wished her to do so even had he known how much might depend upon her refusal? No. He was far too noble. Perhaps at that very moment he was thinking of her rather than of himself. Then came a vivid comprehension of the greatness of that love which he had excited in her breast—a love which might be hopeless, but which, with all its hopelessness, was yet so dear. She felt that she must be true to it, or—die. She could not so forswear herself as to fly with Fleming. With Fleming! She loathed his very name. He was as false as the other true; as selfish as the other generous. She regarded him as he stood, covering her with

his hateful glance, tendering his passion in the guise of love, willing to forego the future if only he might taste revenge. Never had she deemed him so vile a thing.

"Fly with you," she exclaimed; "never! Never—so help me God! Go," she continued, pointing to the door, "and do your worst."

He uttered a low, scoffing laugh. At that moment his spite was greater than his love—that is, if the word "love" can be so degraded as to express the emotion which just now had filled his heart.

"Be it as you will, my pretty one," he sneered. "But, remember, you have destroyed when you might have saved."

"Go," she repeated.

"Possibly you may come to change your song," he continued in the same sneering tone. "I should not be surprised to see you on bended knee—a vain suppliant to him you now despise."

"Never!" she cried. "I would sooner die."

"'Tis easy to talk of dying," he retorted. "Viewed at a distance, death seems a guardian angel; when near, a relentless foe."

"Leave me," she murmured.

He cast at her a baffled, angry look, and, seizing his hat from the table, left the room.

The girl stood, transfixed and pale, until she heard the front door close behind his retreating steps. Then she sank down beside the table, her frame convulsed by a flood of not to be repressed and deep-drawn sobs. The varied emotions of the afternoon had been greater than she could bear. Time, and time alone, could mitigate their shock; a life bespent on others prove her sole, her best ally.

CHAPTER VI.

DOROTHY MADE HAPPY.

Dorothy knew none of these things. She had not been told of Martin's philanthropy, of Minnie's pain, or of Fleming's rage. Her life had been unruffled by disturbing elements, and the recesses of her heart were illumined by an ever-growing light.

It was the middle of summer—when the woods and meadows about the Hall were looking their best, their verdure as yet undimmed by the chills of autumn, and scarce tainted by the smoke of Camptown. The flower-garden was at its brightest. The chestnut standing on the grass-plot hard by the rockery again presented its

welcome shade. It was the time of year which Dorothy loved more than any other —a time when the beauty which is in nature has attained its meridian; when the memory of spring is still green; and the passing hour is untroubled by an instant fear of dark days and still darker nights.

Dorothy delighted in these hours of summer. She revelled in a contemplation of the gifts with which they overflowed, and which then were more distinctly visible than at other seasons. The bird, carolling in its leafy temple; the winged insect, humming its praises in a lower key; the flower, with its thankful fragrance; the sun, beaming gladly on stream and herb and tree—all awoke an echo in her breast, quickening her life, and exciting her faculty for love. Even the spider's web—sparkling with dew-drops, its silken threads glistening in the bright day—revealed a power of which, but for it, she would have remained to some

extent unconscious. To her, Nature in its glorious wealth was but a book, in whose opened page she could study harmony, detect a purpose, and cull truth. The deductions of intellect she regarded with an awe, half-reverential, half-suspicious; nor sought to withdraw the veil which was stretched between herself and them.

Possibly she was right. The deductions of intellect may form an interesting study, be the necessary accompaniment of high culture, the inevitable product of human speculation. They may furnish a corollary, but cannot replace the argument. They may illustrate, but cannot initiate. They may illuminate, but cannot destroy. Their sponsors may be careful and troubled about many things, be cumbered with much serving; but they cannot obliterate the one thing needful, and which shall not be taken away.

So Dorothy was no doubt right when

she preferred the lessons of Nature to the deductions of intellect. Not that she despised the latter. But she regarded them as accessories rather than as essentials—as accidents, which countless souls beyond her own had done without, nor had thereby suffered. In short, Dorothy had jumped, woman-like, to her conclusions, and by that very proceeding had maybe shown wisdom. She had listened to none save the voice of conscience. She was intrenched in a strong position, whose citadel was held by one unconquerable, under whose banner she was enrolled, and whose command was law. And would that all intellect could hearken to the voice of conscience; that, from the rising to the setting of the sun, accessories might give place to essentials. Would, indeed, that all men could trust as Dorothy.

She, then, was happy. Happy both in the glorious summer and the lessons which it taught. Happy, too, in another something

which was blended with this higher cult, and after a fashion impossible for her to solve. Which something was none other than a dream of terrestrial love.

For long weeks this dream had seized the frontage of her life. It had not been vague, elusive, like that former dream in which she once indulged, and which had been so cruelly scattered. It had struggled into being in spite of despair, and spoken peace when she reckoned peace to be gone for ever. It had risen like a young phœnix, burying its old self and rejoicing in a new-found strength. It had required time in which to attain maturity and before it could burn on the funeral pyre its other worn-out body. In the first stages of its life, its steps had been uncertain as those of the little child, which trembles whilst it dares. For the past could not so soon be forgotten. The wound inflicted by Martin's confidences could not at once be healed.

But at last it came, this fresh-born love. She knew not how. A word, one hurried glance, one little act more tender than the last—these, or one of these, had fired the train, turned bitter into sweet, and fostered hope. She had forgot despair, and perhaps none could tell the why or wherefore so well as Dorothy herself. For in these cases exists an intuition which defies reason; a dawning consciousness which, though well-nigh certainty, is not certainty, but rather a feeling to be fondly cherished, and which floods the soul with gentle, oft-recurrent dreams. And Dorothy dreamed such dreams, whilst Nature responded to her beating heart.

Martin also was under some such influence, but not so consciously. His life had wider interests than Dorothy's. The business in Fosset Lane, the larger circle in which he moved, his more active temperament, militated against an introspection so minute.

At first, he simply regarded Dorothy as a sister—a very dear one, no doubt—who had helped to allay his trouble by indicating the path of duty. He had even gone so far as to wish that Agnes could have been like Dorothy. But, as yet, the image of his old love was too deeply engraven on his heart, or, at least, that image as created by his thought, to permit the reception of another. At the same time he felt happier when Dorothy was near. He frequented the Hall more assiduously than he had done before. He was grateful to have found so sweet a counsellor.

Often during this same summer had he been drawn to the Hall of an afternoon, there to find Dorothy sitting with Miss Lander beneath the chestnut or within the arbour. On which occasions Miss Lander, good soul, would feign an engagement, or, rising unnoticed from her chair, would steal down the tree-shaded path which girt the

meadows. And to both Dorothy and Martin these were happy moments. Even their silence, and they were often silent, brought with it a charm—indefinable perhaps, yet conscious—which deepened their emotions and blended their hearts after a sort which neither realized. Together, they would watch the sparkling water as it tumbled from the pond and fell, murmuring sweet things, into its rocky basin. Together they would watch the sunbeams as they danced across the sward or played fitfully upon the rustling leaves. And these things quickened their life.

The dove cooing to its mate in the more distant trees, the redbreast—with the sunlight glancing from its olive-brown, glossy back—hopping at their still feet, and peering curiously with half-turned head into their wrapt faces; these stirred a soul-felt music which was akin to love.

But a negative enthralment such as

theirs could not endure for ever. Sooner or later it must leap the barriers and range the wide champaign beyond. Sooner or later it must find a voice whereby to express its being. Martin could not meet Dorothy day after day, gaze into her face, and dream at her side, without the attainment of a definite result. To have done so would be a violation of those immutable conditions which link the sexes each to each. Nay. Theirs was but the old and many-a-time-repeated story—heart responding to heart, youth drawn to youth, the action of two streams mingling their clear waters while hasting to the vast, immeasurable sea.

No. A negative enthralment like that which possessed these two young lives could not endure for ever, and the time could not be far distant when it must find expression.

So it happened that Dorothy was wont to

spend the long, pleasant afternoon either beneath the shady chestnut or within the arbour where she had surprised Martin in his trouble. And of the twain she preferred the arbour, possibly from its being replete with dearer memories—from its being the spot in which she had first despaired, and where, at a later time, she had refound the faint-glimmering dawn of hope.

She was sitting in this arbour one afternoon towards the end of July. She had been resting in its deep shade for above two long hours, a book upon her knee, but with eyes for the most part raised to the scene without. Yet at times she regarded the page; for the book was a copy of "The Task," and the poet one in whom she delighted. He viewed nature as she so dearly loved to view it. He sympathized with the poor and suffering. He was indignant against wrong. He glanced forward "to a time when visible things will give place to a

higher and brighter order." He was "the freeman whom the Truth makes free;" who felt that "all are slaves besides," who knew that "there lives and moves a soul in all things, and that Soul is God;" that earth pours

> "All her choicest fruits abroad,
> Her sweetest flowers, her aromatic gums,
> Disclosing Paradise where'er He treads."

Nature spoke to Dorothy as it did to Cowper. To both it was a live reality, teeming with mysterious secrets, the one stepping-stone by which the better to comprehend the Giver of all good. For Dorothy had been unspoiled by fashion, was unselfish to the core—a pure, untainted spirit, teaching whilst itself was taught.

So Dorothy sat in the arbour, now gleaning a thought from the old friend upon her knee, now glancing at the sunshine which played upon the sward, now with her mind gently roaming she scarce

knew whither. It was a day that Venus would have chosen on which to woo Adonis. The air was balmy, nor yet too warm. The softest of soft breezes rustled the lighter foliage and stole beneath the creepers which arched the summer-house. The sky was dappled with feathery clouds which interposed a partial veil betwixt earth and the too-scorching rays above. The time conduced to reverie, soothing what was unrestful, leading to sleep. Not that Dorothy altogether slept. But she had grown oblivious to the present, and failed to notice the figure which was so fast approaching.

It was, of course, that of Martin—of Martin hurrying from work, and making for the tryst which had filled his thoughts the livelong day. For him, as for Dorothy, nature had donned her fairest garb—a sensuous beauty that was but the type of that moral beauty which had overpowered

his heart. How lovely he thought her, as with drooped eyelids she dreamed her sweet dream. The tempered sunshine, stealing through the creepers above his head, played upon her dark hair and softened the bloom upon her cheek. The pose of her figure witnessed to the abandon which reigned within; its graceful contour had at no previous time been so irresistible. He stood, and gazed, and gazed again. And then, out of a full heart he sighed.

The sigh caused Dorothy to raise her head.

"Martin!" she exclaimed. "I was not expecting you to-day."

"And, perhaps, are wishing that I had not come?" For by the suggestion of untruths does love seek to entice a stronger confirmation of its hopes.

Dorothy looked at him reproachfully, so much so, that he was more than satisfied.

"Is Miss Lander about the garden?" he next inquired.

"Not to-day. She meant to pay a round of visits this afternoon."

"And your father?"

"Papa left immediately after lunch to attend a meeting of trustees. He said that I must not expect him much before dinner."

Then fell upon them one of those silences which of late they had found so precious. But to-day, however it might be with Dorothy, it failed to bring Martin its usual charm. There was no cascade, as near the chestnut, to murmur sweet things. The breeze was too idly gentle to arrest his thought. The dove, might be, was brooding on its nest, for its voice was mute. And, as he sat in the deep shadow of the summer-house, Dorothy's figure, played upon by the softened rays, was the one distinctive object in the foreground and which seemed to fill the picture. She had placed her book upon

the table, and sat with one hand resting upon its still opened page. The chastened light which pierced the creepers fell upon the hand, heightening its clear tints and displaying its perfect shape. Martin gazed at it long time and earnestly. Then withdrew his gaze to fasten it upon the sun-lit sward, the glistening shrubs, and the blue though cloud-flecked sky which made their canopy. But to no purpose. Time after time his eyes returned to the hand which had first enthralled them. It looked so fair, so delicate, so beautiful. He began to wish that it was his own, to fear lest it might elude his touch, and, like a hand which he had once so prized, be destined for another.

The thought filled him with a vague fear. If that were to be, then indeed must his life be dark—darker than in that time which even now he shuddered to remember. Presently, so great became this fear, that

at last, and haply to relieve it, he stole a glance at the pure face. It was intent on a scene far distant. A half-formed smile hovered about the lips. The bloom nestled on either cheek.

Once more he gazed, and then he, too, was wafted into dreamland.

"Dorothy," he said at length.

"Yes, Martin," she murmured, finding that his speech halted.

"Dorothy! It is a dreadful thing to mistake one's heart; to conceive a purity which has no existence save in the imagination; to devote long years to the worship of what is false."

She made no reply.

"To do so is enough to chill the blood for ever; to destroy all faith in the beautiful and true."

"Yes," she ventured to say. She knew that he was thinking of his blighted love and of the girl who had spurned his troth.

"She was cruel," he went on. "She could not have been more cruel. She converted a long-cherished hope into despair, and exiled me from home. She darkened my life until—until I found a sister."

"Yes," assented Dorothy, with trembling lips. For, coming so fast upon her dream, this word "sister" jarred against the tenderer fibres of her nature.

"Until I found a sister," continued Martin, thoughtless of the pain he gave. "Until I found a sister," he again repeated, dwelling fondly upon the words.

"Yes," Dorothy assented once more.

"To ease my pain, and to show the path of duty."

Poor Dorothy. Was this to be her sole reward, the termination to that dream in which she had indulged? She had fancied that it was to be otherwise, and that light had sprung from out the darkness.

"A sister!" he repeated yet again, but

in so low a tone that she scarcely heard the words.

Then fell upon them another silence. Dorothy dared not trust her voice; whilst Martin compared her to Agnes, contrasting the life-giving sympathy of the one to the worldliness of the other, slowly expunging from his heart the last vestiges of its former love, and taking to himself, each moment more exultantly, the, to him, priceless treasure which he thought to have seized. He did not mean to be selfish. He would have been thunderstruck had the idea been suggested that he might be so. He was but the plaything of his emotions, bathing in the delight of his new-found bliss. He had no conception that Dorothy so near—yet suffered. But love is proverbially blind, and that more especially in the first access of its strength.

And whilst Martin so dreamed, Dorothy

hung down her head and wept. She could not help it. In that hour she could find no comfort, not even with Martin at her side, not even from the sistership which she had promised should be his. Her pain was too unexpected, coming as it did in the guise of an arid waste where but now had stood fair gardens brightened by the gladness of eternal summer.

Poor, misguided, self-tormenting Dorothy.

And yet, not for so long.

> "The Sun flies forward to his brother Sun;
> The dark Earth follows wheel'd in her ellipse;
> And human things returning on themselves
> Move onward, leading up the golden year."

So at length Martin was constrained to express his thought.

"Yes," he said. "It was very kind of you to become my sister and to give me a sister's confidence. But that can be no longer—is henceforth impossible."

Once more, poor Dorothy. Was even

this consolation, slight though it were, to be denied? Nay—listen, Dorothy!

"Henceforth impossible, because you must be something nearer, more precious; because, if you cannot be that, we must part this day—this hour."

He looked into her face timidly, from it to gather hope. She was still weeping, thrilled by a new emotion.

"What, tears?" he exclaimed. "Oh, Dorothy!"

Drawing close to her side, he passed his left arm about her waist.

"In tears!" he again exclaimed. "And why?"

She gave no answer, but rested her head upon his shoulder.

And thus they sat, some long, delicious moments, uncertainty becoming certainty; her tears still flowing, but ceasing to be bitter; he, with a heart exulting in its joy. But, ingrate that he was, even that was not

sufficient. He must, in sooth, press the matter home, and extract from her coy lips all that they had to give.

"Yet, why in tears?" he insisted.

"Because—because"—she whispered—"because I thought that you only loved me as a sister. And I——"

"And you were not quite satisfied?"

"Not quite," she murmured.

He bent his head, and snatched a first kiss from her resistless lips.

"And are you satisfied now, dear?"

"Quite."

"And shall you always love me, and never think that you might have been happier with some one else?"

"Martin!"

"Say—'I love you, dear; shall always love you.'"

She hesitated. Her backward tongue so early in their wooing failed to endorse the dictates of her heart. But he insisted,

and insisted. Until, blushing at what she did, she repeated timidly—

"I love you, dear; shall always love you."

And then—another sweet, long silence. The need for words had sped from both. They felt that

> "love in twain
> Had the essence but in one;
> Two distincts, division none:
> Number there in love was slain."

On which sentiment they might have fed for hours, were it not that something stands ever at hand to disturb the current of life's fondest dream. In their case this something was nothing more terrible than the arrival of Miss Lander, who, having performed one duty to her satisfaction, was eager to commence another. Returning from her round of visits, she had thought of Dorothy—of Dorothy, companionless and dull, longing, might be, for her friend, and grateful for the smallest crumb of comfort.

But, looking into the summer-house, Miss

Lander began to think that her pity might have been misplaced. In fact, nothing could have pleased her more than to find that it had been. For weeks she had trembled for the girl's happiness. She had noted her unconscious reveries, and, much as she liked Martin and esteemed his character, she had begun to think him laggard, wanting in perception, and to doubt the sincerity of his attentions. She had, both purposely and often, left the two alone; but, so far, nothing had occurred to reward her forethought. At no time was patience one of her greatest virtues, and her late disquietude had possibly been aggravated by a recollection of the shipwreck which, in years gone by, had made havoc of her own love. So she had fumed and fretted; had desired but not enjoyed; had sighed and almost despaired.

"Why, Dorothy!" she exclaimed. "I expected to find you alone, moping like a

captive lark in its wicker cage. Why, child! what on earth have you been doing? Your eyes are so red and swollen that they must have been running tears."

Dorothy murmured something in reply; but her words were inaudible.

"Have you been quarrelling, Mr. Ffrench?" continued Miss Lander, turning to Martin and scrutinizing his face.

"No—not that," he stammered. "But I think that Dorothy—Miss Grierson, I mean —has been a little upset."

"Dorothy!—Miss Grierson!" cried the old lady, looking first at one and then at the other. "Pray, how long is it since your sister Dorothy has re-become Miss Grierson?"

"Not," he retorted, still embarrassed, but with a malicious twinkle in his eye, "until your old friend Martin had re-become Mr. Ffrench."

Miss Lander smiled, and possibly guessed the truth.

"Tut, tut," she exclaimed. "You and I have known each other too long to bandy words. What have you been doing to make Dorothy's eyes so red?"

"Well," quoth Martin, but still maliciously; "you must know that I refused any longer to call her 'sister.' And then she began to shed tears."

"And no wonder that she shed tears! But what, may I inquire, did you do to check them?"

"I—well, I—— But it's useless to beat about the bush, Miss Lander. I told her that, if she did not consent to become something dearer than a sister, I must leave her and—for ever."

"And you did not go?"

"How could I have gone, when you see me here!"

Miss Lander felt in better spirits.

"Come hither, Dorothy," she said, taking the girl's hand, and regarding her with a

love which in its tenderness was almost motherly. "Is this true? Has Martin indeed won your love?"

"Yes," whispered Dorothy, answering the interrogatories as best she could.

Miss Lander kissed the girl on either cheek, and with a right good will. She was glad at this ending to her disquietude. For years, Dorothy had been to her a sacred charge, confided to her care by the friend who was long since dead. She had watched over her girlhood; had supported her steps as she entered that wider stage which lay beyond the schoolroom; had of late prayed, and that most fervently, that she might find peace in the love of a noble heart. And now her task seemed done. What she had so much hoped had come to pass. The child had found a mate worthy of herself, and that ere disappointment had dimmed the first freshness of her heart.

"You will treat her kindly," she murmured. "Martin! you will treat her kindly."

He bent over Miss Lander's hand, and pressed it to his lips.

"But, tut," she cried, after another moment. "Who am I, that I should confide Dorothy to your tender mercies? She is not my daughter. There is some one else to be consulted."

"Mr. Grierson, I presume," suggested Martin.

"Mr. Grierson, of course," she replied tartly, thinking perhaps that she had gone too far. "Whom else should I mean?" And then, more kindly, "But, no doubt, you will dine here to-night, and can settle the matter over your wine. In these cases," she added dogmatically, "the sooner an understanding is arrived at the better. And no time can be more favourable for the purpose than that comfortable hour in which a man sips his port."

"Should you like me to return this evening?" he said, addressing Dorothy.

She assented by a look, and then Miss Lander drew her towards the house; whilst Martin slowly wended in the direction of the Widow Toler's.

On the way thither he though of his mother and of the old home. He wondered whether Blanche and Arthur could possibly be as happy as himself and Dorothy. He wondered how his mother would take to Dorothy, and what the Globe-trotter would think of his engagement. Wondered how he could ever have been such a fool as to prefer Agnes, and thought, although it had so pained him at the time, what a merciful thing it was that she had spurned his love. Then, where could he find a house? For of course he could not remain at "the diggings?" Dorothy must have a decent home; perhaps not a very large one, just at first. Indeed, they should not

require many rooms. For a year or two they should not invite many people to stop with them. As it was, the hours which they could spend together would be all too few.

Martin hardly knew that he thought all this. He dreamed rather than thought; floated in mid-air rather than trod the earth. He had become a new creature; life appeared one long ecstasy—a consciousness that he was, in place of an existence overcharged with care. And pity it is that a so great happiness can come but once in the threescore years and ten alloted to sad mortality. For never can it be re-lived.

He did not talk much to Dorothy, either before or during dinner. But his eyes wandered to her face, from it to make assurance doubly sure. And he needed some such fortifier. As the dinner progressed, so did his nervousness increase. Each minute brought him nearer to that

dread time when he should be left face to face with Mr. Grierson.

Nor did Mr. Grierson appear in the best of humours. His fellow-trustees had been stiff-necked, and he had not succeeded in arranging various matters connected with the trust, and in which he took a deep interest, entirely to his satisfaction. And now, he was detailing their stupidity to Miss Lander, occasionally interrupting his story for the purpose of exhorting Martin never to indulge in a pigheadedness like theirs. In fact, Mr. Grierson, all his life long, had been accustomed to have his own way, and opposition left a taste upon his palate which was anything but sweet.

But soon, Martin had shot one last glance at Dorothy as she retreated through the doorway, and the dread moment was at hand. A mist swam before his eyes. He never could remember how he began, or what he said. All that he could recollect

was, that Dorothy's father hemmed, and coughed, and hesitated; that he laid great stress upon his daughter's value, and declared that she was far too young to think of marriage. Until at last, poor fellow, he began to quake about the result and to press his suit more earnestly. He recollected that Mr. Grierson, having recovered from his first surprise and reconsidered the matter, at length relented; that he found himself in the drawing-room, but how that came about he could never tell, seated close to Dorothy, dreaming much but speaking little, whilst Miss Lander remained at an open window—to all appearance, but only to all appearance, busied with a stocking.

It was later than usual when at last he reached the Widow Toler's, but the Globe-trotter had not retired. He was still in the front sitting-room, awaiting, as was his custom, his young friend's return.

"Hallo, Globe-trotter!" exclaimed the new-comer, throwing himself into a chair. "Not gone to bed yet?"

"An' why should I have gone to-night, laddie, mair than another night?"

Martin laughed—a bright, cheery laugh, which it did the other great good to hear.

"I'm sure I don't know, Globe-trotter. Don't even know why I asked the question. Perhaps I was thinking of something else."

"You're not wont to ask idle questions, lad."

Then, as they often did, they enjoyed their silent pipes; whilst Macpherson from time to time eyed his companion furtively. For the smile which lighted Martin's face was unusually bright, and different to any which he had seen to rest there before.

"Globe-trotter!" he exclaimed, after a while, "I am going to be married."

Macpherson started in his chair.

"To Miss Grierson—to Dorothy."

"An' ye ne'er purposed sae wise a thing," returned the Globe-trotter dryly.

END OF VOL. II.

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